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**CHESS
HISTORY
REWRITTEN:
INSIDE THE
GAME-CHANGING
2024 FIDE CANDIDATES
AN IN-DEPTH REPORT**

**BCM EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW
GUKESH ON HIS
CHESS JOURNEY:
THE MAIN OBJECTIVE
IS TO ENJOY THE PROCESS**

FIDE PRESIDENT ARKADY DVORKOVICH:
TORONTO CANDIDATES ELEVATES CHESS WORLDWIDE





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HOW THE 2024 FIDE CANDIDATES WILL BE REMEMBERED

A turning point in the history of chess?

Even before it started, the 2024 FIDE Candidates tournament carried weighty historical implications

This was the first time in its seven decade history that the Candidates tournament was held on North American soil. It was also the first time that both the Open and the Women's tournament were held side by side. The call of history was there for all to hear.

But nerves were jangling as the event could have been severely undermined by bureaucracy and border controls. Right up to the very start of the tournament it was uncertain whether the hosts - Canada - would issue visas to all the eligible players (particularly Indians, due to a political standoff between India and Canada). This was yet another example, if one were needed, of how high-level politics can enmesh international chess. As FIDE's CEO Emil Sutovsky put it in his speech at the closing ceremony in Toronto - "it was a long, bumpy journey at times, but we are very proud that we managed to pull this event together". Under the stewardship of Sutovsky and tournament director Pavel Tregubov, the Candidates tournament did take place with all eligible players competing and the event ran smoothly without a single issue of note.

Indeed, the event was a fine success for the chess world's governing body, the International Chess Federation (FIDE). Despite the tense backdrop of current international events, FIDE orchestrated the world's premier chess tournament in Canada and even succeeded in eliciting a public endorsement from the Canadian Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau. In so doing FIDE also acknowledged its commitment to increasing the global and geographically spread of major chess events and sponsors,

signalling a progressive shift and proactive mindset at the top level of the sport.

Holding the Women's Candidates event simultaneously with the Open was an inspired move, increasing the visibility of women's chess and helping put it on an equal footing with the male-dominated Open tournaments.

And what about the tournaments themselves?

In the chess equivalent of a Hollywood thriller, the outcome of the race in the Open tournament was anyone's guess until the very last moment when 17-year-old Indian prodigy Dommaraju Gukesh (born 29 May 2006 and referred to as Gukesh D) emerged victorious, becoming the youngest winner of the Candidates tournament since its inception in 1950. The previous youngest winner was Garry Kasparov at the age of 20.

Gukesh's victory was decided in an historic game in which he didn't even play! The American Fabiano Caruana and Russian Ian Nepomniachtchi both had the fate of the tournament in their hands - they were paired in the last round and the winner would claim the title. In a nerve-wracking roller coaster of a game lasting 109 moves and six hours, neither emerged victorious and the eventual draw handed the crown to Gukesh.

Gukesh's achievement marks a significant milestone in the history of chess. It shows not only that the game is increasingly dominated by ever younger players, but it may also mark the arrival of a new era in which Indian players and India (the ancient birthplace of chess) become the new epicentre of the chess world. The signs are already clear - three out of eight players in the Open Candidates, and two out of eight in the Women's competition, were from India.

The Indian presence was everywhere to be felt and seen in the Candidates - among the players, the volunteers and spectators. Each day before play got underway and every evening afterwards, large crowds mainly comprising Indians living in Canada squeezed in front of the playing hall, trying

to get a photo or a glimpse of their stars. Such celebrity-style fandom is something modern chess has not seen since the days of Bobby Fischer. The Indian media provided huge coverage of the event, just like other top national sports in India such as cricket. When he arrived home in the southern Indian city of Chennai at 3am(!), Gukesh was mobbed by media crews and fans at this early hour welcoming him back.

Clearly, a new chess superstar from India has burst upon the scene, with every chance of ranking alongside such Indian greats as Vishy Anand and (going back a century or so) the supremely talented Sultan Khan. There would seem to be little reason to doubt that enthusiasm for and engagement with chess in India is likely to explode.

Events in Canada will also surely intensify the pivot in the chess world to the east. The pivot was also confirmed in the Women's Candidates where the former World Champion from China, Tan Zhongyi, convincingly won first place followed closely by her compatriot Lei Tingjie. Once again, the Women's World Champion title match will be contested between two Chinese players - defending Champion Ju Wenjun and Tan Zhongyi. While China's dominance of women's chess at top level continues for the moment, let us not forget that there are also many very strong and rising female players in India.

The 2024 FIDE Candidates tournament is poised to be seen in the annals of chess history as a watershed moment. The legacy is already clear - the choice of a new global location for the flagship event, the rise of a new Indian superstar, the parallel timing of the women's event signalling gender inclusivity, and the dominance of ever younger chess champions. A new dawn for the game may truly be upon us.

We have dedicated this issue of BCM to the 2024 Candidates, to mark this spectacular chess event. We hope that you enjoy it, and we believe that the importance of this event will resonate for decades to come.

Editor



GUKESH: THE MAIN OBJECTIVE IS TO ENJOY THE PROCESS

ON TORONTO, MEDITATION, YOGA, THE MATCH WITH DING AND THE FUTURE OF CHESS

BY MILAN DINIC; PHOTO: FIDE OFFICIAL

Straight from his triumph at the Toronto Candidates, Gukesh's chess path took him to Poland for the Superbet Rapid & Blitz, where he faced Magnus Carlsen, among other top players. Given the exhausting pressure he was under in Toronto, Gukesh's showing in Warsaw, where he ended last, was not that much of a surprise. Still - in a tournament where Carlsen won with a 10-game-winning streak, the 17-year-old winner of the Candidates played a brilliancy and was on the verge of bringing down the Norwegian.

BCM caught up with Gukesh on his way back to India from Poland. We talked about the Candidates, his own preparation and life philosophy, the upcoming match against Ding Liren and the future of chess in India and beyond.

BCM: NOW THAT YOU HAD A FEW WEEKS FOR THE IMPRESSIONS FROM TORONTO TO SETTLE – HOW DO YOU FEEL WHEN YOU LOOK BACK AT THE EVENT?

GUKESH: The Candidates was a very special tournament for sure. The time after that was quite hectic and this tournament in Poland wasn't great. But overall - it's good that I had

a setback after such a high. This will help me find some more motivation and work harder.

I am tired now, but not from chess. It's more the travelling.

BCM: THINKING ABOUT TORONTO, WHICH MOMENTS STAND OUT THE MOST?

GUKESH: The last game after which I saw that I won the tournament. Also, I guess the most important moment was how I handled the round seven loss to Alireza. I think that really changed the way the tournament went for me.

BCM: HOW DID YOU HANDLE THAT?

GUKESH: The loss was very painful, and I was upset for some time. However, I managed to quickly recover. I had time to process it and it somehow gave me a lot of motivation.

I just tried to follow my routines. It's always helpful in such a long tournament to have a routine that you can rely on. My routine consists of two things - some chess work

and some relaxation. That also includes some meditation and yoga.

BCM: IT HAS BEEN COMMENTED THAT YOU COME ACROSS AS A VERY CALM AND STABLE PERSON, BOTH IN REAL LIFE AND OVER THE BOARD. UNUSUAL FOR SOMEONE WHO IS 17. WHERE DOES THAT ENERGY AND STABILITY COME FROM?

GUKEISH: A lot of work was put into that. I was not that way when I was a child. In my childhood, I used to get very upset after a game. Then I started taking mental health seriously. Started doing yoga and meditating. Once I started doing that, I made sure it was done regularly and it made a difference.

BCM: DO YOU MEDITATE DAILY ON A REGULAR BASIS, EVEN DURING TOURNAMENTS?

GUKEISH: Pretty much.

BCM: DO YOU THINK PLAYING CHESS HELPS PEOPLE BECOME MORE FOCUSED AND CALMER?

GUKEISH: I think chess in itself can't do that. I'm obviously not very knowledgeable in this topic - but from what I've heard, if you are taking chess as a hobby, it does help you in this way. For a professional, it's a different level - you have to take it very seriously, practice and work hard, like in any other sport. It's just pure hard work and practice for professionals.

BCM: WHO WAS THE MOST DIFFICULT OPPONENT FOR YOU IN TORONTO AND WHY?

GUKEISH: I did not have any difficult positions so it's hard to say. The only game I had something negative going on in the position was against Alireza, but it was because of the time trouble. I think I was handling all the players quite comfortably. But if I had to pick one, I would say Alireza just because I lost that game.

BCM: YOU HAVE A TEAM WORKING FOR YOU. WOULD YOU TELL US MORE ABOUT THEM?

GUKEISH: Once I qualified for the Candidates, we put together a team. I can't reveal

the names. Obviously, it's known that [Grzegorz] Gajewski has been my head coach for the past couple of years. I worked previously with Vishnu Prasanna who currently isn't a huge part of my chess team but is a mentor always there to support me. There are some others, but I would not like to reveal them yet.

Preparations were normal - we worked on openings, and we tried to improve my play in general. It all went well.

BCM: NOW THAT YOU WON THE CANDIDATES, THE FOCUS TURNS TO THE MATCH WITH DING. WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS?

GUKEISH: It will be a very interesting match. He is a strong player. I am just focusing on doing the right thing and trying my best. Hopefully, it will be a very enjoyable experience.

BCM: WHAT DO YOU SEE AS SORT OF DING'S BIGGEST STRENGTH AND SOMETHING TO WORRY ABOUT?

GUKEISH: I don't think there's anything to worry about. As long as I am playing well and I'm in the right mindset - I don't really worry about my opponents.

But his biggest strength would probably be his experience. He's just a very universal player.

BCM: THERE HAVE BEEN SEVERAL SUGGESTIONS ON WHERE THE MATCH SHOULD TAKE PLACE — INDIA, SINGAPORE, ARGENTINA, UAE. WHERE WOULD YOU FEEL MOST COMFORTABLE PLAYING THE MATCH?

GUKEISH: I will be fine with playing anywhere but playing at home, would be quite special. I would just feel at home and there would definitely be a lot of interest in chess. A lot of kids are taking up the sport in India.

BCM: IN RECENT YEARS WE HAVE SEEN A HUGE RISE OF INDIAN CHESS — BOTH IN TERMS OF THE PERFORMANCE OF INDIAN PLAYERS AND THE POPULARITY OF THE GAME. WE HAVE SEEN THAT YOU RECEIVED A HERO'S WELCOME UPON RETURNING TO INDIA FROM TORONTO. ARE YOU A SUPERSTAR IN YOUR COUNTRY?

GUKESH: Chess has become very popular in India and a lot of people respect and love the game. It's one of the biggest sports right now. Obviously, cricket is still the main thing but It's one of the biggest sports. Chess players are looked upon with a lot of respect. I'm really glad about all the support. I really hope it will grow and become something huge. I would be really happy to be a part of that.

BCM: HOW DO YOU SEE THE FUTURE OF CHESS? HOW WILL THE GAME CHANGE IN THE COMING YEARS?

GUKESH: It's very hard to say, actually. Obviously, the faster time controls and other variants of chess gained in popularity. However, from what I learnt when speaking with others and what I feel is that classical chess will remain the main thing for quite some time. I think chess is doing great. It's gained so much in popularity. And I'm really excited.

BCM: AND DO YOU THINK THAT CHESS HAS ADEQUATE SUPPORT FROM FIDE — THAT THE INTERNATIONAL CHESS FEDERATION IS DOING ENOUGH TO PROMOTE CHESS AND HELP YOU AS A PLAYER?

GUKESH: I feel that this is the case. I am not really into the organisational details, but I am happy as a chess player and I see a lot of interesting chess and a lot of people taking up the sport. So, I am sure FIDE is doing the right things.

BCM: DO YOU THINK THAT YOUR SUCCESS WILL MOTIVATE MAGNUS CARLSEN TO COME BACK AND FIGHT FOR THE RACE OF THE WORLD FOR THE WORLD CROWN?

GUKESH: It's not really up to me. Carlsen has been pretty clear that he does not enjoy classical chess just as much. And I completely understand it. He has won everything in chess and wants to do what he enjoys. It's completely up to him, but personally, as a chess fan, I would be happy to see him back in the world championship cycle.

BCM: AND FOR YOU, AS A CHESS FAN, WHO IS THE NUMBER ONE CHESS PLAYER THAT YOU LOOK UP TO?



The three kings of Toronto: Gukesh (bottom), Caruana (top left) and Nepomniachtchi (top right)

GUKESH: From my childhood, Vishy [Anand] has been a role model for me, both as a chess player and as a person. Surely, Vishy is one of the people who had a huge impact on the game. Other than Vishy, Fischer and Magnus had this strong impact.

BCM: WHAT ARE YOUR IMMEDIATE PLANS NOW WHEN YOU GET BACK HOME — TO REST OR START PREPARING FOR THE MATCH?

GUKESH: I need to process everything. Some combination of playing and relaxation. It's quite an interesting process but the main objective is to enjoy the process.

BCM

INTERVIEW:

FIDE President

Arkady Dvorkovich on the impact
the Toronto Candidates had on chess

TORONTO CANDIDATES ELEVATES CHESS WORLDWIDE

By Milan Dinic

Photo: Stev Bonhage



The 2024 Candidates Tournament is already seen as one of the most memorable events in chess history. In an interview with The British Chess Magazine, FIDE President Arkady Dvorkovich shared his views on the event and its significance for chess and the International Chess Federation

At the age of 17, Gukesh D from India became the youngest ever person to win the Candidates and qualify for the match for the title of World Champion. In the Women's tournament, former World Champion, China's Tan Zhongyi emerged victorious and will be facing her compatriot, Ju Wenjun, in 2025 in the match for the title of Women's World Champion.

Millions of people around the world followed the event, with particular interest from India which had three players in the Open and two in the Women's Candidates.

Dvorkovich emphasized the importance of the event for FIDE's goal to increase the visibility of chess - to have more players and more global attention which will lead to more opportunities for chess and chess players everywhere.

"The Toronto Candidates was the third most-watched chess tournament ever - just behind the 2021 and 2023 World Championship matches. With all major

chess channels broadcasting the event live to millions of viewers daily across the globe, we touched every part of the world. Just one chess channel broadcast the event in 11 languages with 15 million viewers there alone. In the last round, when Gukesh was playing against Hikaru Nakamura, at one point there were 340,000 people following that game which is amazing", said Dvorkovich.

He praised FIDE CEO, Emil Sutovsky for his role in getting the Candidates to Toronto and organizing the event: "Emil was instrumental for this event and the chess world owes him a huge thank you for this achievement. His ideas, determination, and vigor were instrumental in making many events possible and bringing about numerous improvements for professional players".

For the first time in the history of the International Chess Federation, the Candidates Tournament was held in North America. Additionally, this was the first time the Open and the Women's tournaments took place side-by-side.

"Our decision to have the Women's Candidates held concurrently with the Open Candidates proved to be a successful decision as the viewership for women's games also increased. This will lead to more opportunities for women's chess which has

been one of the key goals for my team at FIDE”, he added.

The tournament got a boost from the Canadian Government, with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau sending a welcoming letter to the players and everyone involved in the Candidates.

As 2024 is a year in which FIDE is marking its first centenary, Toronto also hosted the Torch Relay Ceremony. After India, Africa and Europe, the torch reached Toronto and was presented by Dana Reizniece-Ozola, Deputy Chair of Management Board.

“We were pleased to share our celebration with the people of Toronto and the chess community there. Our FIDE100 project - successfully managed by Dana - is an important part of our mission and statement, and these celebrations will continue around the world, finally reaching Budapest for the Chess Olympiad in September”.

The event provided a big boost for FIDE’s social media channels as well, Dvorkovich noted:

“My job is to get chess noticed more and recognized on the global stage and numbers show FIDE is doing that. FIDE social media channels alone grew a lot during the event - we now have more than 300,000 subscribers on Instagram and over 200,000 on YouTube and counting”.

The President of FIDE also noted the large coverage the event got in non-chess media globally.

“Around 100 media companies from Canada, US, UK, Germany, France, India, Austria and other countries were accredited for the tournament and covering the event on site. All major news agencies and networks were regularly in touch about the results and video and photo material which FIDE traditionally provides free of charge. We had articles on the event in major global media outlets, including NYT, Guardian, CNN, Reuters, Al Jazeera,

Forbes, Toronto Star, The Times and many others”, Dvorkovich said.

Additionally, several celebrities were also among the visitors to the event, which Dvorkovich argued provided an important public boost for the sport. Andrea Bocelli, world-famous Italian tenor and a great chess fan visited the tournament, as well as NFL star Mack Hollins. Other well-known people were there such as the producer Todd J. Labarowski, tech entrepreneur Michael Hyatt and others.

“Many other famous or influential people watched the event live from their homes - several business people and government officials from Europe, Asia, Africa, America got in touch about the event with me or my colleagues, and that is great. Over the years more and more well-known people have taken an interest in chess and recognized the work of FIDE - like Andrea Bocelli for example - and that can only help us on our mission to promote chess”, the FIDE President said.

Dvorkovich also talked in more detail about the changes in the global dynamics of chess due to the immense rise of the popularity of the sport in India and China.

“Toronto was an important stepping stone in our mission to increase the visibility of chess globally. Not only was this the first major global chess event in North America, but - as the viewers, media interest and the audience in Toronto showed - there was huge interest from India.

“Chess is changing - more people are playing, the audience is growing and the sport is ever more publicly present. Growing this is a part of my job at FIDE and I am grateful to the team who carried out the work in Toronto - and who are doing the work in many other events - and we look forward to doing more for our sport. As chess gains momentum globally, FIDE will continue to work relentlessly in promoting our game and getting more opportunities for players everywhere,” said Dvorkovich.

THE OPEN

TORONTO CANDIDATES PRODUCE THE YOUNGEST-EVER CHALLENGER

**The Candidates
tournament held in
Toronto from 4-21 April
had a scenario that few
film screenwriters could
have imagined**



By GM Aleksandar Colovic, www.alexcolovic.com; Photo: FIDE Official

The final round in Toronto, where four (!) players were in real contention to win the tournament and they all played each other (!) is unlikely to happen again. The drama and tension compressed in the game Caruana-Nepomniachtchi was a breathtaking example of hope and despair, chess at its most unforgiving extreme.

Like with the preview of this event, we will look at all the players in Toronto and analyse their performance.

THE 'ACCIDENTAL' CANDIDATE

The rating outsider lost half of his games, drawing the rest. That was only somewhat underperforming his current rating. It was perhaps understandable that Abasov wouldn't fight for top honours, but it was curious to see if he managed to beat somebody.



As it turned out, he didn't. His strategy was to be extremely solid with both colours (employing the Petroff with Black) and never to mind making a draw. The strategy was sensible, but the problem for Abasov was that he was simply a class below the rest. This meant that even though he was well-prepared and usually obtained good positions after the openings, he often ended up being outplayed as the game progressed. This led to mistakes later in the game, frequently in time-trouble, when his level would drop even lower. Examples

of this were his first game with Caruana and both games against Gukesh. As it turned out, scoring 2-0 against Abasov was a major factor for Gukesh in winning the event.

Abasov's best achievement was drawing his mini-match with Nepomniachtchi. The second draw, played in round eight, was his first with the black pieces (having lost all previous three games). In this game, he showed good opening preparation in the Petroff (which, in fact, transposed to an Exchange French) and good tactical control in the middlegame. He only managed one more draw with the black pieces, in round 13 against Vidit.

Many people considered Abasov's participation in the Candidates "an accident", but it will undoubtedly give hope to many players who are outside the elite - seeing Abasov qualify, they will think, if he could do it, why shouldn't I be able to do the same?

THE REPEAT OF THE NIGHTMARE

Firouzja (5 out of 14)



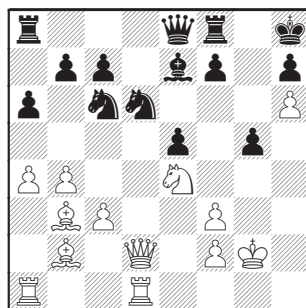
One of the pre-tournament favourites bombed spectacularly. He lost six games and apart from drawing 1-1 with Gukesh, lost all the mini-matches against the players who finished on a plus score.

In fact, Firouzja had a repeat nightmare event as in the previous Candidates in Madrid in 2022. There he lost to Nepomniachtchi in round four, in Toronto

he lost to him in round two. In both events, he couldn't recover from this early loss. It was worse in Toronto, because thanks to Nepomniachtchi's imperfect memory he obtained some advantage out of the opening with the black pieces. However, he didn't take his chances in the middlegame complications and lost the game.

Ian Nepomniachtchi - Alireza Firouzja

Candidates Toronto (2), 05.04.2024



Nepomniachtchi introduces a very interesting idea with a pawn sacrifice in the anti-Berlin with 4.d3, but he couldn't remember all the details and misplayed the complicated middlegame position. While the position is very complicated, it is White who feels the pressure to prove compensation. Firouzja didn't manage to find the correct way to proceed.

23...f6? Allowing White's next move, after which the advantage shifts to White.

23...f6! was the correct move. Black simply solidifies the centre and opens the h5-e8 diagonal for the queen, with ideas like ...g6 or ...h5 now possible. With the a1-h8 diagonal blunted, Black has a safe king and can in fact start play against White's king along the g-file after ...g4. 24.b5! White must try to deflect Black's attention from the kingside even at the cost of a second pawn. It's an incredibly difficult decision to take for White. 24...axb5 25.axb5 ♖xa1 26.♖xa1 ♜xb5 27.♗d5 ♜d6 28.♜c5 g4!? 29.fxg4 ♗g6 with an unclear

position where White's king is the more vulnerable one.

24. ♖d7! An endgame is in White's favour as a rook on the seventh rank would be difficult to expel.

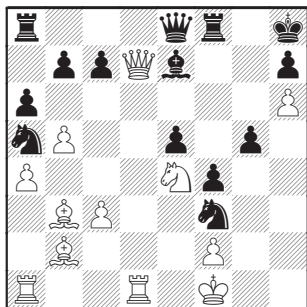
24... ♖h4+ 25. ♔f1 f5 26. ♖g3! ♖xf3 27. b5 Black won a second pawn, but in doing so weakened the long diagonal, which now White tries to use by undermining the defence of the pawn on e5.

27... f4 Firouzja tries to complicate matters and succeeds!

28. ♖e4? A natural move, placing the knight on a blocking post, but an imprecision that allows Black to equalise.

28. ♖xe8! exchanging queens first would have eliminated the threat of an attack on the white king. After 28... ♖xe8 29. ♖e4 ♖b8 30. c4 when in spite of being two pawns down, White has a solid advantage thanks to the scattered placement of Black's forces and White's pressure on the queenside and centre.

28... ♖a5?



Firouzja misses the chance, but one can hardly blame him. Take a look at the following lines and the number of only moves the players have to find in order to stay in the game:

28... ♖h5! would have forced either a perpetual, or would have led to unclear complications after 29. bxc6 ♖h2+ 30. ♔g1 ♖f3+ 31. ♔g2

(31. ♔f1 ♖h2+ is a perpetual.) 31... ♖h4+ 32. ♔f1 ♖f5! the first tricky move for Black. 33. ♔d5 now it's the only move for White not to lose! 33... bxc6 again, the only move for Black. 34. c4 and another only move for White not to lose. 34... ♖h1+ 35. ♔e2 ♖h5+ 36. ♔d3 again avoiding perpetual. 36... cxd5 37. ♔xe5+ ♔g8 38. ♖xd5+ ♖f7 with a big mess on the board with chances for both sides;

28... ♖h2+ was another alternative. After 29. ♔g2 ♖g6! 30. ♔xh2 ♖xe4 31. ♔g1 (31. bxc6? ♖f6! and Black wins with a direct attack on the white king.) 31... ♖e2! an incredibly difficult move! The idea is to keep the d1-rook under attack after 32. bxc6 ♖ad8 33. ♖e6 (33. ♖xe7 ♖g4+ leads to a perpetual check.) 33... ♖xd1+ 34. ♖xd1 ♔c5! 35. ♖f1 ♔xf2+! now Black forces a perpetual. 36. ♖xf2 ♖e1+ 37. ♔g2 f3+! 38. ♖xf3 ♖e2+ 39. ♔g1 ♖e1+ with a draw.

29. ♔e6? Another missed chance. White had to drop the bishop back to a2, with or without an immediate exchange of queens.

29. ♔a2! ♖d8 (29... g4 30. ♖xe8 ♖axe8 31. ♖d7!+- should be winning for White, as the rook on the seventh rank is destroying Black's queenside, but the position remains very complicated) 30. ♖xc7 and the knight on a5 is in trouble, but for a human this is not obvious to be clearly winning, with the white king still lacking protection with a lot of pieces still on the board;

Or 29. ♖xe8! ♖axe8 30. ♔a2 is also good for White, though the lines are complicated. For example 30... ♖d8 31. ♖xd8 ♖xd8 32. c4 threatening ♔c3 or c5. White is two pawns down, but his pieces are much better coordinated.

29... ♖g6? Missing another chance.

29... g4! was the only way to stay in the game. 30. ♔a3 ♖xd7 31. ♖xd7 ♔xa3 32. ♖xa3 ♖ae8 with yet another mess, this time with mutual chances.

30. ♖xe7 Now White is winning and Nepomniachtchi didn't allow more chances in the remainder of the game.

30...♟h6 31.♙f7! Attacking the e5-pawn and threatening mate.

31...♟h3+ After 31...♟h1+ 32.♙e2 ♖g1+ 33.♜xg1 ♜xe4+ 34.♙f1 ♜d3+ 35.♙g2 ♜e4+ 36.♙h2 the king hides from the checks and White wins thanks to the threat of ♟f6 mate.

32.♙e2 ♟f5 33.♙d5 The only, but sufficient move. White has a piece for three pawns, but with many pieces on the board, the pawns cannot show their worth.

33...♞ae8 34.♟xc7 ♟g4 35.♙d3 The king is safe in the centre as it's surrounded by its own pieces.

35...♞d8 36.c4 ♞xd5+ Desperation, but with no increments until move 40, time trouble was an important factor in most games.

37.cxd5 ♟h3 38.♙g3 ♙c4 38...fxg3 39.♙xe5+ ♙xe5+ 40.♟xe5+ ♙g8 41.♟xg5+ ♙h8 42.♟e5+ ♙g8 43.♟xg3+ is a game over as the queens are exchanged.

39.♟xc4 fxg3 40.fxg3 axb5 41.axb5 ♞c8 42.♞h1 White wins in many ways. This is one of them.

42...♟d7 43.♟e4 ♙g8 44.♙e3 ♙d4 45.♙xd4

1-0

The above game was just one example of the many that showed the extremely high level of complexity of the matches in Toronto. As you can see, and will see the same in the other games, even the best players in the world found it impossible to navigate this level of complexity and made many mistakes, especially in time trouble.

The loss had a devastating psychological effect on Firouzja. After two draws in the next two games, he lost two games in a

row, to Nakamura and Vidit, dropping to -3 and out of contention. He continued to play fighting chess, but for him the tournament was over.

As the tournament was coming to a close, with the players getting tired, Firouzja lost three more games, with his game against Gukesh from the penultimate round turning out to be the decisive one for the fate of the future Challenger (see the game analysed later in the text).

At the age of 20 and with two catastrophic Candidate tournaments behind him, it's certain that Firouzja has a lot of time to overcome his psychological problems. On the other hand, he may as well turn out to be the next Ivanchuk, a genius who could never conquer his inner demons.

These inner demons, fuelled by his disappointment at how the event was unfolding, exploded during round nine Firouzja was asked not to make creaking sounds (and possibly change his shoes for the next games) while walking in the refreshment area as he was disturbing some other players. His reaction was to complain about the unprofessional behaviour of the arbiter and vent out on social media. It was a storm in a teacup, but a telling sign of the tension and pressure Firouzja was playing under.

Firouzja's best game was the swift demolition of Abasov in round 11.

Alireza Firouzja - Nijat Abasov

Candidates Toronto (11), 17.04.2024

1.♙f3 ♙f6 2.b3 Firouzja was very close to beating Nepomniachtchi with these two opening moves in his previous game with the white pieces, so here he tries again.

2...c5 3.♙b2 ♙c6 4.e3 g6 Abasov was apparently prepared and chose one of the most solid variations against White's setup.

5.d4 cxd4 6.♘xd4 ♕g7 7.♙e2 0-0 8.0-0 ♘xd4 The most direct approach. Black exchanges knights and occupies the centre with his d-pawn.

9.♙xd4 d5 10.♘d2 ♖d6 10...♙f5 11.c4 ♖c8 has been played in the online game Le,T (2557)-Carlsen,M (2835) from 2023.

11.c4 White must get rid of the d5-pawn.

11...♖d8 It was also possible to play ...e5 first.

12.cxd5 White had an interesting alternative in 12.c5!? ♖c7 13.f4 playing on control of the dark squares in the centre.

12...♖xd5 13.♙f3 ♖f5 Black had good alternatives in 13...♖a5 and 13...♖b5. The activity of White's bishops should be neutralised by the rook on the d-file and the symmetrical nature of the position.

14.♖c1 ♗e8 Black correctly wants to exchange the centralised bishop.

15.♖c5 e5? A blunder which immediately puts Black on the verge of defeat.

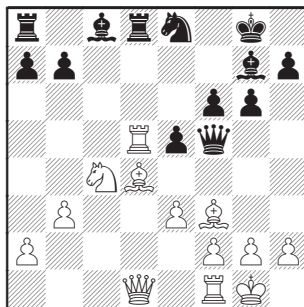
After 15...♖e6 Black is fine, for example, 16.♙xg7 ♗xg7 17.♖c2 ♖b6 and Black will develop his queenside with ...♙d7 and ...♖ac8.

16.♗c4! It seems as White voluntarily pins himself on the d-file, but the pin on the fifth rank is no less important.

16...f6? The second, and fatal mistake.

Black could still stay in the game after 16...♗c7 though White still keeps a big advantage after 17.♗xe5 (or 17.♖a1 exd4 18.♖xf5 ♙xf5 19.♖c1 when Black doesn't have enough compensation for the lost queen.) 17...♗e6 18.♙g4 ♖f6 19.♙xe6 ♖xe6 20.♖f3 with a clear pawn up.

17.♖d5



The winning move. By attacking the rook on d8 White solves the problem of the pin on the d-file and White's active pieces take control of the whole board.

17...♖xd5 18.♙xd5+ ♗h8 19.♙c5 The difference in the piece activity is obvious.

19...♖d7 20.♙f3 ♖b8 Black can barely move.

21.♙xa7 ♖a8 22.♗b6 ♖xd1 23.♖xd1 ♖xa7 24.♗d8 Black loses more material, so he resigned.

1-0

VIGOUR AND INCONSISTENCY

Vidit (6 out of 14)



The surprise winner of the Grand Swiss had an excellent start when in round two beat one of the pre-tournament favourites,

Nakamura. He did so by introducing a very interesting novelty in the anti-Berlin variation with 4.d3.

Hikaru Nakamura – Vidit Santosh Gujrathi

Candidates Toronto (2), 05.04.2024

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 ♗f6 The Berlin was Vidit's main opening against 1.e4 in Toronto.

4.d3 Nakamura doesn't want to go for the endgame.

4...♙c5 5.c3 0-0 6.0-0 d6 This move was all the rage for a very long time, before it was replaced by the plans with ...d5 several years ago. There is nothing wrong with either move, just another case of chess fashion.

7.h3 ♗e7 8.d4 c6!? A surprising novelty in a position where everybody was retreating the bishop back to b6.

9.♙d3 After 9.dxc5 cxb5 10.cxd6 ♗g6 Black will round up the pawn on d6 and obtain very good play.

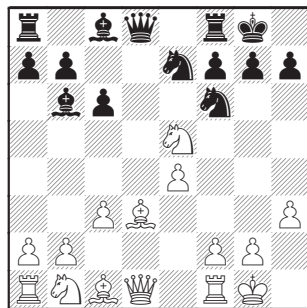
9...♙b6 10.dxe5 Nakamura goes for the most principled continuation, but this will show the dangers players face when entering territory that has been deeply analysed by their opponent's machinery.

10.♗bd2 was an attempt to obtain normal play, typical for this line. It is a transposition to the lines usually arising after 8...♙b6 9.♗bd2 c6 10.♙d3. 10...♗g6 and now there is a lot of theory as White can choose between 11.♖e1, 11.a4 and 11.♗c4;

10.♙e3 d5! equalises immediately for Black;

10.♖e1 ♗g6 is another transposition, where apart from 11.♗bd2 White has the move 11.a4 at his disposal.

10...dxe5 11.♗xe5



11...♙xh3! This tactical resource is the basis of Black's opening play.

12.♗c4? The first of the several unfortunate choices by Nakamura.

12.gxh3 was better. 12...♗b8! is Black's idea, to have the ...♙c7 resource at his disposal after 13.♙f4 (13.♗f3? just loses to 13...♗g3+ 14.♖h1 ♗xh3+ 15.♗h2 ♖ad8) 13...♙c7 when Black regains the piece with balanced middlegame after 14.♙h2 ♙xe5 15.f4 ♙c7 16.♗f3 ♗g6

12...♙g4 13.♗c2 ♙c7 By here Vidit was on his own - the engine doesn't show the move 12.♗c4, so he didn't analyse it, which means that he had to figure out things for himself on the board. He managed it wonderfully.

14.e5 ♗d7 Going to d5 was also good for Black, after 14...♗fd5 15.♙xh7+ ♖h8 16.♙d3 f5 is again the key move that gives Black an advantage.

15.♙xh7+ ♖h8 16.♙d3? Second mistake by Nakamura. The position is extremely complicated and to stay in the game White had to navigate some mind-boggling lines, both in terms of finding difficult moves and accurately evaluating the unorthodox positions.

16.f3!? was another curious move that was possible. 16...♙h5 (16...♙e6 17.g3! with the idea of ♗h2 is a rarely seen motif. Black fends it off with 17...♗g6! 18.♗h2 ♗h4! an amazing idea, blocking the h-file with a knight sacrifice. 19.♙d3 b5 20.♗e3 ♗xe5 when the mess continues, but Black's initiative gives him an

advantage.) 17.g4 b5! meeting an attack with counter-attack! This move is the strongest, though Black has tempting alternatives in 17...f5 and 17...g6. 18.♖h2! ♘xh7 19.♗xh5+ ♕g8 20.♔g2! intending ♖h1. 20...f5! a key move for Black in many lines. Here it ensures there is no mate on h8. 21.♖h1 ♕xe5 with a very complicated position where Black's pieces are more developed and this gives him the initiative;

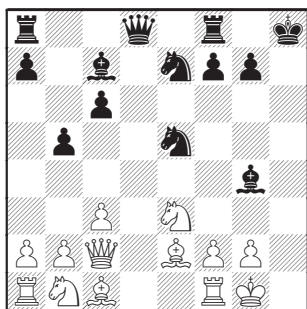
16.♗e4! was the best move. 16...f5! 17.♕xf5! ♕xf5 18.♗h4+ ♕g8 19.♕g5 White sacrificed a piece, but has compensation thanks to the awkward pin on the h4-d8 diagonal. The line continues after 19...♖f7 20.♔d6 ♔xe5 21.♕xe7 ♖xe7 (21...♗d7 is an alternative, with more complications after 22.♔xf7 ♔g6! 23.♔e5! ♕xe5 24.♗c4+ ♕e6 25.♗e4 ♔f7 26.f4! good luck finding all this over the board... 26...♕c7 27.♕c5 ♕d5 28.♗e3 ♖e8 29.♗h3 ♗xh3 30.gxh3 b6 31.♕f2 ♔xf4 where Black's activity is worth more than White's exchange, but White should survive.) 22.♔xf5 ♖f7 23.♗xd8+ ♖xd8 with good compensation for the pawn.

16...b5! Vidit conducts the game with great energy.

16...f5! was also strong, for example 17.f4 b5 or 17...♔d5. 18.♔e3 ♕b6 when White's undeveloped queenside tells the whole story.

17.♔e3 ♔xe5 Material is equal now, but the difference in the activity of both armies is obvious.

18.♕e2?



After this White is just lost and the rest is a wrapping up procedure.

18.♔xg4 was the last try, though after 18...♔xg4 19.g3 f5 it's not certain that White will survive, though his chances are higher than in the game.

18...f5 There was a good alternative in 18...♗d6, setting up a battery on the h2-b8 diagonal.

19.f4 19.♔xg4 fxg4 with ...♗d6 next is devastating.

19...♕b6! White managed to shut the h2-b8 diagonal, so the bishop moves to the one next to it that opened.

20.♔f2 20.fxe5 ♔d5 regains the piece.

20...♔d5 Black wins in many ways. With their level of opening preparation, it's an extremely rare sight to see an elite player finding himself totally lost with the white pieces before move 20, and with a completely undeveloped queenside to add to the embarrassment.

21.♖h1+ ♕g8 22.fxe5 ♗g5 Black easily regains the piece while the attack continues.

23.♔e1 ♕xe3 24.♕xg4 ♗xg4 25.♕xe3 ♔xe3 26.♗e2 ♗g3+ 27.♔d2 ♖ad8+ 28.♔c1 ♗g5 29.b3 ♔f1+

0-1

Truly an impressive start by Vidit, who for a very brief period found himself leading the tournament.

The disappointment followed immediately, when in the next round he lost with the white pieces to Praggnanandhaa, dropping back to 50%. That was another complicated game, where Vidit missed his saving chances (see the game below). It was a common occurrence in Toronto, thanks to the complexity of the games, for the winning

player to allow chances for salvation, only for the opponent to miss them.

In the game with Nakamura, Vidit demonstrated his best qualities: excellent preparation and calculation and a sense for initiative. However, he wasn't always able to show these qualities.

After losing to Praggnanandhaa, he faced Nepomniachtchi, who decided to enter the Berlin endgame as he was armed with an interesting novelty. Vidit reacted well, the game was complex, but eventually, Vidit erred in time trouble and lost.

Another great trait of Vidit's is that he kept faith in his own abilities and never gave up. In spite of sinking to a minus score, he kept on fighting and believing he could beat anyone. He was out-prepared by Caruana, but outplayed him and was completely winning before blundering into a perpetual check. In the next round he blew Firouzja off the board in a sharp Sicilian. The game was practically over by move 15:

Vidit Santosh Gujrathi - Alireza Firouzja

Candidates Toronto (6), 10.04.2024

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.♗c3 ♗c6 Firouzja didn't have much luck with the Sicilian. Here he chooses the Classical, in round 10 he chose the Najdorf against Caruana, but he lost both games.

6.♗c4 A rare guest in modern practice and definitely something Firouzja didn't expect. Fischer's favourite move is considered neutralised by both 6...♖b6 and 6...e6, but obviously Vidit discovered new ideas in these lines. White's usual choice is 6.♗g5 leading to the Richter-Rauzer Attack.

6...♖b6 Considered the safer choice. After 6...e6 White can play the ultra-sharp Velimirovic Attack with ♗e3 and ♖e2 and this requires good preparation and revision of the lines before the game,

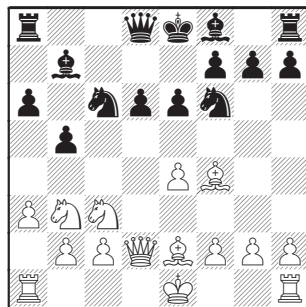
something Firouzja didn't do even in the line he chose in the game.

7.♗b3 e6 8.♗f4 ♖d8 Not the common choice.

The classics played 8...♗e5 9.♗e2 ♗d7 (9...♗e7 10.♗e3 ♖c7 11.f4 ♗c6 12.♗f3 gave Kasparov a memorable victory against Vidit's great predecessor: 1-0 (35) Kasparov,G (2805)-Anand,V (2715) Linares 1994.) 10.a4 ♗e7 11.a5 ♖c7 12.a6 0-0 13.0-0 ♗fb8 ½-½ (13) Kasparov,G (2795)-Kramnik,V (2730) Horgen 1995.

9.♖d2 a6 10.a3 A useful move, preventing a future ...b4 and not determining the position of the white king just yet.

10...b5 11.♗e2 ♗b7?



Firouzja makes an automatic move, which turns out to be a serious mistake.

11...♗e5 12.0-0-0 ♗e7 13.♖b1 leads to a typical Sicilian battle.

12.0-0-0 Black is already in trouble as he cannot easily deal with the attack on the pawn on d6.

12...♖b6 The problems are illustrated after the natural 12...♗e5 which is met by the crushing 13.♗xb5! axb5 14.♗xe5 dxe5 15.♗xb5+ and White wins.

13.g4! Vidit's feeling for the initiative is on full display.

13...♖xf2 This loses, but Firouzja was getting desperate.

13...h6 is better, but White is well on top after 14.f3 when Black cannot easily finish development and deal with the threat of h4 and g5 in combination with the pressure along the d-file.

14.e5! A powerful break after which White is winning.

14...♘d7 14...♗xe5? 15.♙xb5+ wins the queen on f2; **14...dxe5?** leads to a forcing line where White wins the black queen after **15.♙e3 ♖g2 16.♗dg1 ♗h3 17.♗g3 ♗h4 18.♙g5 ♗d8 19.♗e3**

15.exd6 ♖b6 16.♙e3 ♗d8 17.♗hf1 Black can barely move and Vidit won without allowing any chances in 40 moves.

1-0

The main disadvantage for Vidit was his inconsistency. His tournament was interspersed with wins and losses, he couldn't build on the momentum of his excellent wins. He beat Nakamura for the second time in round nine, completing a rare 2-0 over the American, but that was followed by two consecutive losses to Nepomniachtchi (where he was winning after outplaying his opponent after an early exchange of queens in the Petroff, but lost his way in time trouble) and Caruana in rounds 11 and 12.



The final result of -2 with three wins and five losses reflects Vidit's potential when it comes to playing on the very highest level - he is capable of beating the best, but because of his profound calculations he is also prone to time trouble and big mistakes that can turn winning games into lost ones. The lessons from Toronto will be crucial for Vidit if he is to continue to be part of the very top of the chess world.

VERSATILE STYLE AND MIXED RESULTS

Praggnanandhaa
(7 out of 14)



Praggnanandhaa's second in Toronto was Peter Svidler. This was revealed on the eve of the event and was considered a major coup for the prodigy. An elite grandmaster with experience of playing the Candidates himself, a second to World Champions in World Championship matches, what more can a player ask from a second?

A curious question about Svidler's presence was how would his own more dynamic style combine with Praggnanandhaa's more technical and positional play? As it turned out, Praggnanandhaa was able to demonstrate versatility in his style, but the results were mixed.

The evolution of his style, to incorporate a more dynamic approach, will need some time. In Toronto, this was apparent when his fantastic opening preparation

was not quite in tune with his more positional preferences.

Here are a couple of examples.

Praggnanandhaa R - Gukesh D

Candidates Toronto (2), 05.04.2024

1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♘f3 ♘f6 4.g3 The Catalan can lead to different types of positions. In this game Praggnanandhaa goes for the sharpest ones.

4...♗b4+ 5.♘c3 This move implies that White will sacrifice material, the pawn on c4, in order to obtain a pawn centre.

5...dxc4 6.♗g2 0-0 7.0-0 ♘c6 8.a3 ♗e7 9.e4 White obtained the centre, but Black is a pawn up. Sharp play lies ahead.

9...a6 10.♗e3 b5 Black has alternatives, like 10...♘a5 and 10...♗b8.

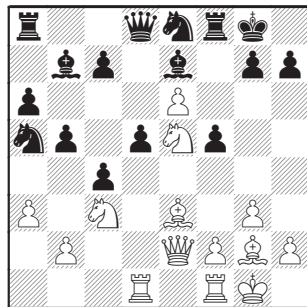
11.♖e2 It's possible to develop the queen to c2, as well.

11...♗b7 12.♖ad1 ♘a5 13.d5!? Here comes the ultra-aggressive approach. It was possible to play more positionally with ♘e5 and f4.

13...exd5 14.e5 ♘e8 15.e6 Sacrificing a third pawn, all preparation!

15...f5 It was preferable to take the pawn, though it's understandable that Gukesh was wary of his opponent's preparation, who played practically a-tempo to this point. **15...fxe6 16.♘d4** White can also try **16.♗f4**. The engine gives Black preference in these lines, but the position is so complicated that a human sitting at the board will calculate for hours and still have no idea what is going on. **16...♗d6 17.♗f4 ♗xf4!?** **18.gxf4 ♘f6 19.♘xe6 ♗e8 20.f5** and the mess goes on.

16.♘e5



The position is objectively unclear now, but that doesn't really help the players. It's all about calculation and the feeling in which direction the game should go. In this game, Praggnanandhaa managed to catch the opponent in his preparation, but the type of position wasn't entirely to his liking. When the preparation ended he started to spend masses of time in this hair-raisingly complicated position, but in spite of that didn't take his chances and eventually lost the game. See the remainder of the game later in the article!

Praggnanandhaa R - Ian Nepomniachtchi

Candidates Toronto (5), 09.04.2024

In this game, White prepared a deep idea against Nepomniachtchi's main opening.

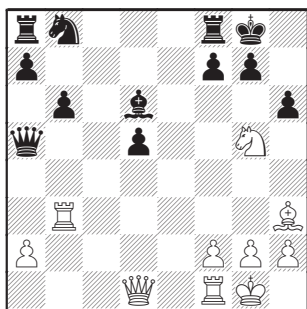
1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘f6 3.♘xe5 d6 4.♘f3 ♘xe4 5.d4 d5 6.♗d3 ♗d6 7.0-0 0-0 8.c4 c6 9.♘c3 ♘xc3 10.bxc3 dxc4 11.♗xc4 ♗f5 12.♗g5 ♗a5 13.♘h4 ♗e6 14.♗xe6 ♗xg5 15.♘f3 ♗a5 16.♗h3 This is the first step. More frequent are **16.♗b3** and **16.♗b3**.

16...♗xc3 Black improves on his own play.

16...♗c7 17.c4 ♘d7 18.♗e1 gave White some advantage in the online game 1-0 (56) Mamedov,R (2646)-Nepomniachtchi,I (2793) Chess.com 2023.

17.♖b1 b6 18.♖b3 ♖a5 19.d5! Still playing a-tempo, Praggnanandhaa managed to find a line that his opponent couldn't remember. Objectively, Black should draw, but over the board Nepomniachtchi couldn't find the way.

19...cxd5 20.♘g5 h6



20...g6 was also possible, though this gives White a choice between 21.♘e6!? (21.♖d3 intending ♘e6 or ♖xd5; and 21.♙g4 intending ♖h3.)

21.♘xf7! ♖xf7 The only move.

21...♖xf7? 22.♙e6 ♘c6 23.♙xd5 ♖c5 24.♙xf7+ ♖xf7 25.♖f3+ ♖g6 26.♖d1 when the exposed black king and the unstable position of the black pieces gives White a winning advantage, though not a forced win just yet.

22.♖d3 This move was also blitzed out, though there were alternatives.

22...♘d7! For the time being Nepomniachtchi finds the best moves.

22...♘c6? 23.♖xd5 ♙c5 24.♖b3! wins on the spot;

22...♖g8? 23.♙e6+ ♖h8 24.♙xd5 wins the rook on a8;

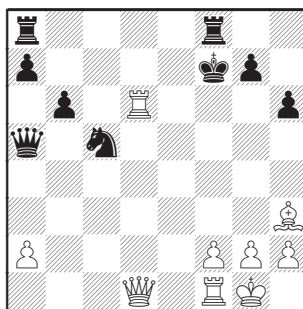
22...g6 23.♖a1 is unclear, but in view of the weakening of the long diagonal and the f6-square, quite dangerous for Black;

22...♘a6 was an alternative to the game move, which could have transposed after 23.♖xd5 ♙xh2+! 24.♖xh2 ♘c5.

23.♖xd5 ♘c5? The moment when White's preparation paid off. Black falters at the last hurdle.

23...♙xh2+! was the correct move. Black grabs a pawn and exposes the white king. After 24.♖xh2 ♘c5 25.♖d6 ♖g8 26.♖d5+ ♖h8 27.♖e5 ♖xa2 the analogous winning line from the game doesn't work in view of 28.♙f5 (28.♖xh6+ is possible, with unclear play after 28...♖g8 29.♖h4) 28...♖g8 29.♙b1 ♖f7 as now the winning move in the analogous line 30.♖b2 is not possible exactly because of the king's position on h2: 30...♖f4+ wins the rook on d6.

24.♖xd6



Now White is objectively winning.

24...♖g8 25.♖d5+ ♖h8 26.♙f5? Praggnanandhaa was thinking on his own now, but failed to find the win. Again, we see him in a position that is not in his usual style, a position where he must seek precise moves in a dynamic situation. He fails and chooses a move that steers the game towards a technical endgame, but the endgame is drawn.

26.♖e5! was the winning move. The best line is incredibly difficult to see, but a player like Svidler (for example), with an inner feel for the initiative and attack

should be able to find it. 26...♖xa2 27.♙f5! ♘g8 28.♙b1! ♖f7 29.♖b2! A series of difficult moves, ♙f5-b1 and ♖b2, creates an attack on the king from the first two ranks of the white queenside. The threat is ♙a2. 29...♖f4 30.♖a2+ ♘h8 31.♖c2 and White wins thanks to the mating threats on the b1-h7 diagonal.

26...♗b7! 27.♖xa5 ♗xa5 White is a bit better in the endgame, but Nepomniachtchi didn't have trouble holding the draw.

½-½

The only game where this approach worked, though not without hiccups, was his win over Vidit in the third round. The game was also notable for the use of an extremely rare and risky variation by Black.

Vidit Santosh Gujrathi - Praggnanandhaa R

Candidates Toronto (3), 06.04.2024

1.e4 e5 2.♗f3 ♗c6 3.♙b5 a6 4.♙a4 f5!? The delayed Schliemann (or Jaenish) variation. The inclusion of the moves ...a6 and ♙a4 gives the opening a different direction than the immediate 3...f5.

5.d4 This is the strongest move here, whereas after 3...f5 this move doesn't give White much.

5...exd4 6.e5 b5 The second surprise, as 6...♙c5 is more often played, though that doesn't mean it's necessarily better.

7.♙b3 ♗a5 Here again Black chooses the road less taken, as 7...♙b7 is the more popular move. The engine gives White a solid advantage in all these lines, but Vidit was obviously surprised and finding all the engine moves that promise that advantage alone is impossible. We also saw the same situation in the game with Nepomniachtchi.

8.♗xd4 Taking with the queen is also good.

8...♙b7 9.♗xf5?! It didn't take long for Vidit to make a wrong turn. After this pawn grab Black is objectively fine. Praggnanandhaa's opening preparation and surprise paid off nicely.

It's possible that Vidit mixed up the lines with 9.0-0! c5 10.♗xf5 when the pawn grab is justified and the piece sacrifice gives White a serious initiative after 10...c4 11.a4!? a move that hasn't been played before.

9...♗xb3 10.axb3 d6! The game is very sharp and objectively balanced. Black has the long-term advantage of the pair of bishops, but he still needs to finish development and coordinate his forces.

11.♖e2 After 11.exd6 ♖d7! is the key move - Black attacks the knight on f5 and prepares long castle.

11...♖d7 12.e6 12.exd6+ ♔f7 13.♗e3 ♙xd6 is followed by ...♗f6, ...♖he8(f8), ...♙g8 when Black has very good play.

12...♖c6 13.♙g5 The threat is ♗xg7 while at the same time White develops and stops Black from castling long.

13...g6 An alternative was to play ...♗e7 or ...♙e7.

14.♗e3 h6 15.♙f4 15.♙h4 ♖e4 16.♙g3 ♗e7 and Black obtains comfortable development after ...♙g7 and then either ...0-0 or ...0-0-0.

15...♗e7 It was possible to go after the pawn on e6 with 15...♖e4 16.♙g3 ♖xe6 17.0-0 ♗e7 but Praggnanandhaa prefers to speed up his development first.

16.c4 White tries to create some activity before Black consolidates.

16.0-0 ♙g7 is excellent for Black: he is almost fully mobilised (only needing to decide where to put the king), with the bishops roaring along the long diagonals, while White has little to show for it.

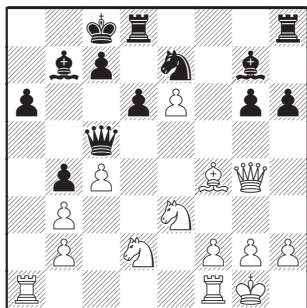
16...b4 Stopping the natural development of the knight to c3.

17.♖g4 Vidit understands the urgency his long-term prospects demand. He cannot allow Black to coordinate at peace so he tries to create threats with every move. The queen defends the pawn on e6 and introduces tactical ideas on the h3-c8 diagonal.

Still, it was better to play **17.♖d3** as the queen is more centralised on d3 than on g4. **17...♗c5** (17...0-0-0 **18.♖d2 ♗g7** 19.0-0-0 leads to a very complex middlegame. Black has the bishops, but White still is a pawn up and has good centralisation.) **18.♖d2 ♗g7** **19.♖e4** this is one of the ideas of ♖d3, to allow for the knight's jump to e4. **19...♖d4** **20.♖xd4 ♗xd4** **21.♖d1 ♗xb2** **22.♖d5** with a very complicated endgame ahead.

17...♖c5 17...0-0-0 **18.♖d5 ♔b8** was an alternative, moving the king from the vulnerable h3-c8 diagonal.

18.0-0 ♗g7 **19.♖d2** **0-0-0?**



A mistake that turns the game on its head. Praggnanandhaa blunders in a position that is not in his style.

19...0-0! **20.♖ad1 ♖f6** was much better, when Black plans to round up the pawn on e6 with ideas like ...♗h5 or ...h5.

20.h4? Vidit misses his only chance in this game to play for more than just equality.

20.♖d5! was the correct move. After **20...♖xd5** **21.e7+!** **♖d7** **22.cxd5 ♗xd5** **23.♖c4↑** White has a big initiative and Black is on the verge of defeat. Quite a turnaround! **23...♗f5** is the only move for Black to stay in the game. Still, after **24.♗g3 ♗f6** **25.♗xd6!** **♗xe7** **26.♖b6+!** **cx b6** **27.♗xe7** White has a very strong attack against Black's weakened king, helped by the presence of the opposite-coloured bishops.

20...♖de8 Black regains the advantage now.

20...♗xb2 **21.♖ad1 ♗h5!** was another strong sequence, forcing the exchange of queens and leading to an endgame where Black has the better chances.

21.♖ad1 ♗xb2 **22.♖d5!** White must go forward.

22...♖xd5 **23.cxd5 ♗xd5** **24.e7+?** Too hasty. It's incredibly hard to balance the need for activity and the correct timing for it.

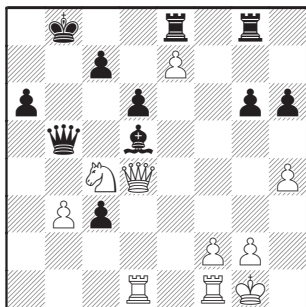
24.♖fe1! **♗c3** **25.♖e4 ♗xe4** **26.♖xe4** was better. In the endgame after **26...♗h5** **27.♗xh5 g x h5** **28.♗d2!** with the idea of f4-f5 White has very good chances to hold the game.

24...♔b8 **25.♗e3 ♗b5** The engine suggests giving up the b4-pawn with check with **25...♗c6** as better, but no sane human would consider it.

26.♖c4 ♗c3 **27.♗d4 ♖hg8?** Black defends the pawn on g6, but this lets all of his advantage slip.

The simple **27...♖xe7** **28.♗xc3 bxc3** **29.♗d4 ♖he8** was much stronger, eliminating the pawn on e7 and slowly steering the game towards a more technical nature, where Black's superior light piece and queenside majority should be decisive in a possible endgame.

28.♗xc3 bxc3 **29.♗d4?**



White also misses a good chance here. The square is correct, but a different piece should have used it.

29. ♖a3! ♜b7 30. ♜d4! with the idea of ♜b4 leads to an unclear position. On the other hand, it's understandable that it was hard for Vidit to properly evaluate the voluntary withdrawal of the knight on the rim.

29... ♙b7?! The bishop will be vulnerable on b7 to attacks after ♖a5, so putting it on a8 was better.

30. ♜xc3 ♜xe7 31. ♖a5! This gives White counterplay.

31... ♜e5 32. b4? A strange decision. It's commonly known that in positions with only queens and rooks on the board king safety is of paramount importance. Therefore taking on b7 and playing ♜d4 would have practically guaranteed White against a loss - Black's unsafe king would have made it impossible to advance the queenside pawns.

32... g5! Not bad, but in view of the previous comment, it also made sense to preserve the superior light piece that also protects the black king with 32... ♙a8!.

33. h5 It's a bit too late now for 33. ♖xb7 ♜xb7 as Black threatens to open the g-file and attack the white king. Keeping it closed with 34. h5? doesn't work in view of 34... g4

33... g4 Again 33... ♙a8 made sense, but Black wants to be more aggressive.

34. ♜fe1? The final mistake.

34. ♜c1 ♜g7 35. ♖xb7 ♜xb7 was at least more resilient for White, though compared to the comment to White's 32nd move here his pieces are much worse and Black's are much better.

34... g3 Now White's king comes under attack and it decides the game.

35. ♖xb7 Three moves too late!

35... gxf2+ 36. ♜xf2 ♜xb7 The point about king safety in queen and rook positions on full display.

37. ♜f3 The only way to avoid being mated, but the rook endgame is hopeless.

37... ♜eg5 38. ♜xb7+ ♜xb7 39. g4 ♜xg4 40. ♜e6 ♜h4

0-1

When Praggnanandhaa played in his usual style he had no problems holding draws. He made easy draws with Nakamura and Caruana with the black pieces, even having the better chances against the latter. Unfortunately, he had one bad game in the whole event, a loss with the white pieces against Nakamura in round 11, which effectively ruled him out of contention for the top places as that loss dropped him back to 50 percent. He lost another game with the white pieces to Caruana in round 13, possibly these two losses were a result of fatigue that late in the tournament.

A win in the last round against Abasov sweetened the end, but finishing on 50% was probably not what Praggnanandhaa hoped for before the start. In any case, the work with Svidler, the introduction of sharper opening systems and the expansion of his style will undoubtedly work in his favour in the long run. He can take a lot of positives from this event that will certainly help his further rise.

THE STAR-CROSSED CONTENDER



Caruana (8.5 out of 14)

Three players shared second place, with the tie-break putting Caruana in fourth. This is misleading, as Caruana was in fact the only player from those sharing second who had a real chance to finish tied for first.

The pre-tournament favourite for many, including the author of these lines, was the tragic hero of Toronto.

Caruana started the event slowly. He won in round two against Abasov only thanks to the latter's mistakes in time trouble. In the other games of the first half, he didn't really have any chances for more than a draw and in fact avoided a loss to Vidit and saved an inferior position against Praggnanadhaa.

The beginning of the second half of the tournament was identical to the one in Madrid - he lost to Nakamura. This was Caruana's fourth(!) loss in a row to Nakamura with the black pieces, the previous three being at the last Candidates, Norway Chess and the Grand Swiss. These losses followed the same scenario - an opening surprise by Nakamura, with Caruana unable to recall his preparation, resulting in a one-sided win for White. The strange thing about the loss in Toronto was that the opening

was in fact quite innocuous and it led to a very safe position for Caruana. Other explanation than "it must have been psychological" is difficult to find.

A few rounds later Caruana said that he wasn't feeling well at that stage of the event, implying health issues, but that those had passed and he felt his strength coming back. This showed on the board as after dropping to 50% after that loss to Nakamura and failing to make the most of a promising endgame against tail-ender Abasov, he started to pick up wins.

It was high time, as his spurt started as late as round 10, when he beat Firouzja in an uneven game where both sides missed chances. This was followed by two wins in a row in rounds 12 and 13 against Vidit and Praggnanandhaa, which put him only half a point behind leader Gukesh before the last round.

The last round was unique in more than one way. Nakamura (8) was playing Gukesh (8.5) and Caruana (8) was playing Nepomniachtchi (8). All sorts of scenarios were possible, but it was clear that all players on eight points had to win if they were to keep their hopes alive for a possible tie-break for first place.

Caruana's story in the tournament was one of the great comeback. He was trailing for most of the event, almost written off after the loss to Nakamura, but a last-ditch effort and three wins in the rounds 10-13 suddenly put him back where he certainly belonged - in a direct fight for first place.

How do you approach a must-win situation? The commonly accepted wisdom is that you should try to surprise your opponent and ideally achieve a position which you are more comfortable playing.

That is what both players tried to do in the most important game of the tournament.

A GAME FOR CHESS HISTORY

The game was an epic clash, one that will be studied in the times to come, both in terms of chess content and in terms of chess psychology.

Fabiano Caruana - Ian Nepomniachtchi

Candidates Toronto (14), 21.04.2024

1.d4 Caruana usually plays 1.e4, but he probably wasn't sure whether Nepomniachtchi would stick to the Petroff or choose some Sicilian.

1...♢f6 2.c4 e6 3.♢c3 Allowing the Nimzo-Indian.

3...d5 But Nepomniachtchi sticks to the QGD, his main weapon since the match with Carlsen in 2021.

4.cxd5 exd5 5.♢g5 ♢b4 This move is the one that shows Nepomniachtchi's ambitions. It is more dynamic than the standard 5...♢e7 and is an attempt to steer the game in less towards explored waters. However, as we will soon see, surprise for a surprise's sake is not enough - one must also know and feel the ideas in the new positions.

6.e3 h6 7.♢h4 g5 8.♢g3 ♢e4 9.♣c2 An alternative to the more forcing 9.♢ge2 h5.

9...h5 10.f3 ♢xg3 11.hxg3 ♢e6 Black has more than one option, others are 11...♣e7 and 11...♢c6.

12.♢d3 It's also possible to start with 0-0-0.

12...c6 Around here Nepomniachtchi mixes up his preparation. After the game he admitted that he mixed up all the ideas in the position, unsure if he should go for ...c5 or ...c6 and the exact move-order to implement those ideas. He said that usually

happens when one plays an opening or a variation that one doesn't know well.

12...♢d7 was the most flexible, keeping the option of ...c5, but at the same time not committing to either ...c6 or ...c5. **13.a3 ♢d6 14.♢ge2 c6** is quite acceptable for Black, with unclear play ahead after **15.0-0-0 ♣c7 16.e4** with a position that certainly would have favoured both players as it offers chances to both of them;

12...c5 is possible, but likely somewhat inferior as after **13.♢ge2 ♢c6 14.a3 ♢xc3+ 15.♣xc3** White has a stable advantage thanks to the better pawn structure and superior bishop.

13.0-0-0 Most likely Caruana didn't remember the exact move-orders, but he remembered the idea of setting up his pieces: 0-0-0 and then e4 or f4 with ♢f3 or ♢ge2, depending on circumstances.

13.a3!? was likely more precise, as it more or less forces Black to give up the bishop pair. **13...♢xc3+ (13...♢d6?! 14.f4! gxf4 15.gxf4 gives White an advantage as Black cannot continue development with ...♢d7 in view of f5, trapping the bishop on e6.) 14.♣xc3 ♢d7 15.♢e2** with a more pleasant position for White, mainly because of the uncertain future residence for the black king.

13...♢d7 14.f4 This must have been Caruana's idea in his preparation.

14.a3 again was possible; **14.e4** was an alternative central push. After **14...dxe4 15.fxe4 ♣f6 16.♢ge2** the position is quite sharp.

14...♢g4 One of the possible replies.

14...gxf4 15.exf4 (15.gxf4?! ♢f6 allows Black to establish control over the central light squares.) 15...♢g4 16.♣e1+ ♣f8 17.♢f3 with unclear play. Possibly Nepomniachtchi was worried about the position of his king and had an intention to castle long, as in the game;

14...♘f6 15.♘f3 g4 16.♗e5 is better for White - Black closed the kingside, but now has a pawn on h5 that needs constant defence, in addition to allowing a strong knight on e5.

15.♘f3 White finishes development, though playing 15.♖e1 was a decent alternative.

15...♞e7 Preparing long castling, but Black had two interesting alternatives.

15...gxf4!? 16.exf4 ♕xf3 17.gxf3 ♞f6 the queen is well placed on f6, eyeing the pawn on d4. 18.♗e2 (18.♖he1+?! ♕d8 threatens the pawn on d4 as 19.♕f1?! h4! wrecks White's kingside.) 18...0-0-0 19.g4 with unclear play where both sides have their chances;

15...♞a5!? looked unpleasant for White - Caruana. The position remains double-edged after 16.fxg5 0-0-0 as White's extra pawn means very little.

16.e4!? Caruana strikes while the opponent's king is still in the centre. The complications begin.

16...♕xc3?! The first step in the wrong direction.

16...dxe4 was the correct way for Black not to end up in an inferior position. After 17.♕xe4 gxf4 White has tempting options, but Black manages to stay afloat. 18.♕xc6!? opening the e-file and threatening ♖e1. (18.♖he1 0-0-0 19.♕xc6 ♞f8 20.♗d5!? ♕xe1 21.♕xb7+ ♕xb7 22.♞c7+ ♕a8 23.♞c6+ leads to a perpetual check.) 18...♕xc3 19.♕xb7 ♖b8 (or 19...♕xb2+ 20.♕xb2 ♞b4+ 21.♞b3 ♞xb3+ 22.axb3 ♖b8 23.♕c6 fvg3 24.♖a1 when White can try to press thanks to the weakness of the a7-pawn, whose loss would give White a passed pawn on the b-file.) 20.♞xc3 0-0 21.♕c6 ♖fc8 22.d5 with a very messy position where Black has definite counterplay.

17.♞xc3 ♕xf3 17...gxf4? 18.exd5 wins for White, the threats are ♖e1 and dxc6;

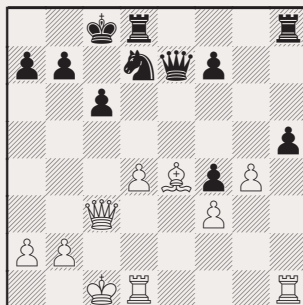
17...dxe4 was an alternative. 18.♕xe4 0-0-0 (Black doesn't have time for 18...gxf4?

in view of 19.♖de1!) 19.♖de1 ♞f6 20.fxg5 (20.♕xg5 ♗b6 21.♘f3 ♗d5 gives Black good compensation.) 20...♞g7 21.♞e3 when Black has some compensation for the pawn.

18.gxf3 dxe4 19.♕xe4 White keeps the e-file open and with the bishop on e4 has sacrificial ideas like ♕xc6 or d5.

19...gxf4 20.g4 20.d5 looks tempting, but Black has the saving 20...♞c5! 21.dxc6 ♞xc3+ 22.bxc3 bxc6 23.♕xc6 0-0-0 with an equal endgame.

20...0-0-0?



The real mistake that puts Black on the verge of a loss. The game hadn't gone Nepomniachtchi's way from the beginning. His opening choice didn't give anything in particular. Slowly he drifted into an inferior position, without a single chance to take over the initiative and play for more than just equality. This gradual pressure that he was feeling now results in a bad move and from this moment until the end of the game it's pure survival mode for him. On the other hand, everything was going ideally for Caruana: he made the most of the opening, forced a mistake and is now on the verge of obtaining a winning position.

20...h4! was the only way to stay in the game. 21.♗b1 0-0-0 22.d5 was Caruana's intention. It was indeed the strongest continuation. Black is still worse, but

not lost after 22...♗e5 23.dxc6 this is the simplest. 23...♗xc6 24.♙xc6 bxc6 25.♖xc6+ ♔b8 26.a3 White can press forever in this position thanks to the weak black king.

21.d5! Caruana plays very forcefully. This is the best move, after which White is objectively winning, but a lot of lines still remain to be calculated.

21...h4 21...♗e5 22.gxh5 is practically a pawn up for White;

21...♔b8 was the most resilient, but still winning for White after some difficult moves: 22.dxc6 ♗c5 23.♙de1!

a) 23.♙c2 keeps an advantage, but is not winning;

b) 23.♙d7?! this is flashy and very dangerous, but in fact allows Black to escape if he finds the following line: 23...♙xd7! (23...♗xd7? 24.c7+! ♔a8 25.♙xh5! ♙hg8 26.♖c6! a beautiful move, threatening mate on b7. 26...♙b8 27.♙b5 still going for mate. 27...♗c5 28.♖xc5 ♖xc5+ 29.♙xc5 ♙bc8 30.♗c2 Black is paralysed and White simply walks over with the king to the kingside collecting Black's pawns.) 24.cxd7 ♙d8 25.gxh5 ♗xe4 26.fxe4 ♖xe4 27.♙d1 f3 and Black survives;

23...h4 (23...♗xe4? 24.♙xe4 ♖d6 25.gxh5 bxc6 26.♖b4+ forces a winning rook endgame - White has a rook behind his passed pawn and all Black's pawns are weak.) 24.♗b1 Black is really struggling to find constructive moves while White threatens ♙c1 now. 24...♗xe4 25.♙xe4 ♖d6 26.♙b4! b6 27.♙d4! ♖g6+ (27...♖xd4? 28.c7+ ♔b7 29.c8♖+! ♙xc8 30.♖xd4 wins the queen.) 28.♗a1 and White should be winning, as the dangerous passed pawn on c6 and the weak black king should make it impossible for Black to defend the position long-term.; 21...♗f6 22.d6! ♗xe4 (22...♙xd6 23.♙xd6 ♖xd6 24.g5 wins the pinned knight on f6.) 23.♖xh8!



♟xd6 24.♞xh5 ♞e3+ 25.♚b1 ♞xf3 was calculated by Nepomniachtchi, but in fact a "game over" according to Caruana as Black doesn't have compensation for the exchange after 26.♞he1

22.dxc6 ♟c5 23.♙f5+ By here time trouble was starting to become a factor for Caruana.

23...♚b8 24.♚b1! A strong move, taking the time to improve the position of the king as Black is given a choice of sad options.

24...b6 Not better or worse than the alternatives.

24...bxc6 25.♞b4+ ♚a8 26.♞c1 ♞d5 27.♙e4 wins as Black's pieces are all tied up.; 24...♞xd1+ 25.♞xd1 ♞e8 26.cxb7 ♟xb7 27.♙e4 and White should win - Black's king is just too exposed.

25.♞d7 One of the possible ways to win.

25.♙d7 was similarly effective.; Even taking the time to open a *luft* with 25.a3 was sufficient, as Black is still lacking constructive moves.

25...♞xd7 26.cxd7 ♞d8 27.♞d4 ♟xd7 28.♞d1 Black shouldn't be able to survive the onslaught. Nepomniachtchi tries to stay somehow in the game.

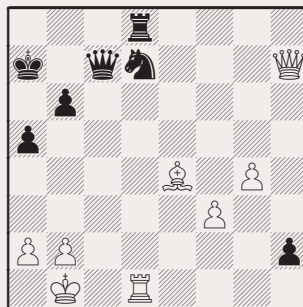
28...♞c5 The idea is to transfer the queen to c7 in order to protect the king.

28...♚c7 29.♞xf4+ ♟e5 30.♞e1 f6 31.♞a4 with the double threat of f4 and ♞xa7.

29.♞xf4+ ♞c7 30.♞d2 h3 31.♙e4 With the idea of ♞d5. Caruana was already playing with only a few minutes left, with no increment before move 40.

31...a5 Black wants to avoid getting mated by freeing the a7-square for the king.

32.♞d5 ♚a7 33.♞xf7 h2 34.♞h7



The beginning of the culmination of the first drama in this game. With very little time on the clock, Caruana was still looking for a clear-cut win, but never managed to find one. The reason for this was simple - there were several clear-cut wins, but the tension and the pressure clouded his vision. The move played in the game is perfectly fine and for the time being things still go as planned.

34.f4 "Maybe should have played this quickly, put the bishop on h1 and push the pawns." - Caruana in the press conference.

34...♚b8 35.a3 A move that shows that White still hadn't found the clear-cut win. A clear-cut win means one thing in this position - elimination of the only source of Black counterplay, the pawn on h2.

The easiest way to do this was by 35.♞d2 and the game would have been over - the pawn on h2 is lost. This was the moment where it was the simplest for White to wrap the game up. The main point is that Black doesn't have the defence 35...♟c5 in view of 36.♞xd8+ ♞xd8 37.♞xh2+ with check, when the two extra pawns make it easy for White;

35.♞h1 with the same idea is less precise in view of 35...♟f6 36.♞xc7+ ♚xc7 37.♞xh2 ♟xe4 38.fxe4 ♞d1+ 39.♚c2 ♞g1 and Black keeps some practical chances, though this should also be winning.

35...♖e5 36.♗h6 Attacking the pawn on b6 and forcing the queen back.

36...♗c7 37.g5 White misses a second chance for the simple 37.♗d2.

37...♖g8 38.♖h1 With no pin on the d-file, White finally decides to address the issue with the h2-pawn. Nothing has been spoiled yet.

38...♗c5 39.♗h7? Played with seconds left on the clock and a very bad move, as it complicated the win to a big extent. Why Caruana didn't play the most natural 39.♗c2, followed by the capture of the pawn on h2 on move 40 is beyond our understanding. He couldn't explain it himself in the press conference after the game. It's as if the players unwillingly and unknowingly followed an invisible script.

39...♖xg5! Caruana saw this, but he thought it was winning.

40.♗xg5 40.♗xh2? is a draw after 40...♗xh2 41.♖xh2 ♖g1+ 42.♗a2 ♖f1.

40...♗xh7+ 41.♗a1? Caruana said he shouldn't have rushed with this, but by here he must have realised how annoying it was to allow this position to happen in the first place.

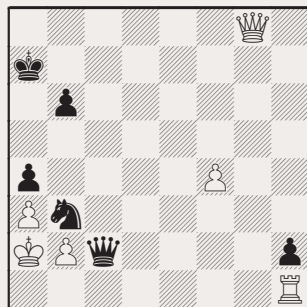
41.♗a2! was winning, allowing checks, but destroying the coordination of the black pieces in the process. 41...♗f7+ (41...♗c2 42.♗f4+ with ♗xh2 next.) 42.♗a1 ♗b3+ 43.♗b1 ♗xf3 44.♗e5+ ♗b7 45.♗xh2 and while it will take some time, White will win this.

41...♗c2 Now the game is objectively drawn. However, the drama continues as the problems the players have to solve persist and the complications only increase.

42.♗g8+ ♗a7 43.♗a2 a4 This creates a good outpost on b3 for the knight.

44.f4 44.♗g7+ ♗a6 45.♗h8 threatens ♗xh2. 45...♗c4+ 46.♗b1 ♗d3+ 47.♗a1 ♗c2 and White cannot take on h2 in view of 48.♗xh2 ♗b3+ 49.♗a2 ♗c1+ with a perpetual check.

44...♗b3?



After a heroic defence, it is Nepomniachtchi's turn to go wrong and hand another chance to his opponent.

44...♗a6 was the only move. After 45.♗a8+ ♗b5 46.♗d5 ♗a6 Caruana was panicking as he didn't see what he could do here. The position is drawn as White indeed cannot make further progress.

45.♗g7+ White is winning again, but it is still not simple.

45...♗a6 46.♗c3 ♗g2 47.♗c4+ ♗b7 48.♖e1! Correctly activating the rook for the attack on the king. That pawn on h2, that White was so focused on eliminating, survived all the storms and stayed alive, though now that shouldn't have mattered.

48...♗c5 49.♗f1 White consolidated, the h-pawn is under control and the queen supports the push of the f-pawn.

49...♗d5+ 50.♗b1 ♗f5+ 51.♗a1 White threatens ♗h1xh2.

51...♗c2 52.f5 If Black doesn't try to do something the f-pawn will promote.

52...♖d3 53.♞b1 ♖c5 54.f6 ♖b3+ 55.♔a2 ♖d2 56.♞h1+ The check from g2 was also possible.

56...♔a7 57.♞c1 ♞b3+ 58.♔a1 ♞e6 59.♞c7+? The players received 30 minutes after move 40, so in spite of having a 30-second increments, the positions were often complicated enough and those 30 minutes were insufficient for proper calculation and understanding. By here Caruana was getting into eternal time-trouble and he errs again. It won't be the last time...

59.♞e1 was by far the simplest. White finally captures the pawn on h2 and should win after 59...♖b3+ 60.♔a2 ♞xf6 61.♞xh2;

59.♞d1 ♖b3+ 60.♔b1 was similar - White manages to take on h2 after 60...♞f5+ 61.♔a2 ♞xf6 62.♞xh2

59...♔a6 Now Black shouldn't lose.

60.f7 ♖b3+ 61.♔b1 ♞f5+? A losing mistake, but it's hard to blame Nepomniachtchi.

He had to see that after 61...♖d2+! 62.♔c2 ♞f5+! 63.♔xd2 ♞f2+ there is a perpetual check on the board.

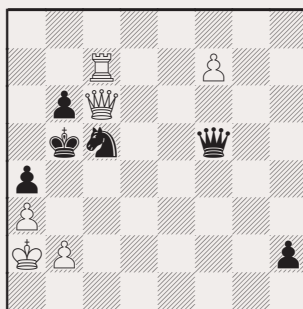
62.♔a2 White is winning again.

62...♖c5 63.♞a8+ ♔b5 64.♞c6+ The first omen. It would have been ideal if Caruana saw the winning sequence and played this just to gain time on the clock, but if he had seen it, he would have played it immediately, as there would not have been a need for extra time in that case. The fact that he repeated meant he didn't see it. His reaction at the press conference when shown the "two-move tactic" (as he called it) was one of complete despair and devastation.

64.♞e8+ ♔a6 65.♞e2+ was missed by both players. It's a check and White

picks up the h2-pawn. This is important from a practical perspective in the game, though the engine says it's a forced mate from here.

64...♔a6 65.♞a8+ ♔b5 66.♞c6+?



The final moment when Caruana could have won and qualified for a tie-break for the right to become the Challenger. There was still time for 66.♞e8 followed by ♞e2.

66...♔a6 It was no longer possible to give a check on a8 in view of a threefold repetition. Now the game is a draw and there are no more chances.

67.♞e7 ♞f1 68.♞a8+ ♔b5 69.♞e8+ ♔a6 70.♞a8+ ♔b5 71.♞e8+ ♔a6 72.♞e4 Caruana finds the only way to prolong the game, transposing to a drawn 2 vs 1 queen endgame.

72...♖xe4 73.♞xa4+ ♔b7 74.♞xe4+ ♔a7 75.♞a4+ ♔b7 76.♞d7+ ♔a6 77.♞c8+ ♔a7 78.f8 ♞ ♞xf8 79.♞xf8 h1 ♞ 80.a4 The rest of the game was just taking time to come to terms with what could have been. Caruana finally gave up on move 109 when he offered a draw.

½-½

A game for the ages.

In spite of getting so close, the tension, the pressure, the complexities of the variations that needed to be calculated and the time trouble all put together were too much for one of the best players of our time. Credit also must go to his opponent, who managed to put up tremendous resistance and make it as hard as possible.

Immediately after the game finished the players discussed a few lines. When this exchange died off there was a moment of silence and then Nepomniachtchi uttered "I'm very sorry," to which Caruana, already standing up from the board, muttered "My fault."

There are no prizes for second place in the Candidates and Caruana will consider his result a failure, mostly because of the last game. The main question is how this will affect him in the future? Will he find it in himself for another assault at the Candidates in two years? For the good of chess, I hope so, but that is a question only Caruana can answer.

WHEN 40 OUT OF 42 ISN'T ENOUGH



Nepomniachtchi
(8.5 out of 14)

If we take into account the current and the previous two Candidates tournaments, each having 14 rounds, for a total of 42 rounds, Nepomniachtchi

has been in the lead, either alone or shared, in 40 of them. The only time he wasn't in the lead was after the penultimate round in Toronto!

After the last game with Caruana, it was visible that Nepomniachtchi was dismayed. However, as the game went, he shouldn't really blame himself - he didn't have a single chance in that game and his only hope was not to lose. A far cry from the win he needed.

Toronto was far from the smooth sailing in Madrid, where things were going his way in every possible way. Additionally, Nepomniachtchi was less convincing this time.

After the draw against Abasov in the first round, Nepomniachtchi won against Firouzja in the second. We saw the game above, it was in fact Firouzja's bad play that allowed him to win, rather than his own superior play.

Nevertheless, things started looking even worse as he was lost against Gukesh in round three, allowing himself to be outplayed from an equal endgame (see the game below). Then he was lost against Praggnanandhaa (see above for the details) and then against Nakamura in round seven. These were all consecutive games with the black pieces and he continued to suffer as he was almost lost against Firouzja in round nine. In round 11 he ended up lost from an equal endgame against Vdit, but managed to turn it around and even win. So many avoided losses sometimes give the player the sensation that things are, indeed, going his way and he should try to ride his luck. However, Nepomniachtchi didn't really manage and this indicates that his level wasn't as high as the one he demonstrated in Madrid.

When playing with White, he played openly for a draw in his games with Caruana in round seven and

Praggnanandhaa in round 12. Not trying to win with White is usually a bad idea and it's not quite clear what he was hoping for with a lot of competition for the first place.

His best chance in the tournament was in the penultimate round, when thanks to his opponent's mixed-up preparation, he suddenly obtained excellent winning chances.

Ian Nepomniachtchi - Hikaru Nakamura

Candidates Toronto (13), 20.04.2024

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 a6 Nakamura usually plays the Berlin, but in Toronto he prepared all sorts of opening surprises. In this important game, he springs one of them.

4.♙a4 ♙c5 The delayed Cordell variation, with the moves ...a6 and ♙a4 inserted, became pretty popular recently, often played by another Candidate, Praggnanandhaa.

5.0-0 5.c3 ♘ge7 6.d4 exd4 7.cxd4 ♙b4+ 8.♙d2 (or 8.♘c3) 8...♙xd2+ followed by ...d5 leads to a different type of position.

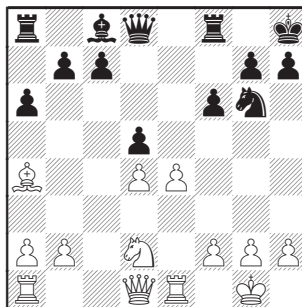
5...♘ge7 6.c3 ♘g6 7.d4 ♙a7 8.♙g5 f6 9.♙e3 0-0 10.♙bd2 ♚h8!? This is the first surprise in a well-known theoretical position. The common move for Black has been 10...d6, but Nakamura's idea is to play in the centre with ...d5 in one go, if possible.

11.♖e1 exd4 Nakamura pursues his idea, as 11...d6 was still an option.

12.♘xd4 After 12.cxd4 d5 Black achieves the central thrust and is doing fine.

12...♘xd4 13.♙xd4 After 13.cxd4 d5 14.exd5 ♘e7 Black is fine as he will find good play against the IQP on d4.

13...♙xd4 14.cxd4 d5?



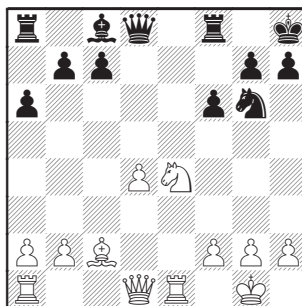
This was blitzed-out by Nakamura, but soon it became evident that he mixed up his preparation.

14...d6! was the correct continuation, with the idea of ...f5. 15.♙b3 (Now in case of 15.♘f3 d5! is strong, even with a loss of tempo, as the knight on f3 is effectively limited by the black pawn on f6. 16.exd5 ♘f4 with good play for Black.) 15...f5! 16.e5 d5 with the blockading maneuver ...♘f4-e6 in mind, with good play.

15.exd5 ♖xd5 There is no time for 15...♘e7 as after 16.♖f3 ♘xd5 17.♘e4 the knight is aiming for the c5-square or simply ♘c3 to remove the blockading knight on d5.

16.♘e4 ♖d8 16...b6 was better, though it doesn't solve Black's problems after 17.♖c1 ♖d8 18.♙c6 ♖b8 19.♖a4 and here Black must find the only move 19...b5 (19...♘e7 20.d5! and Black can barely move.) 20.♖b4 ♖b6 when he is still under pressure after 21.♖c3.

17.♙c2?



This soft move epitomises Nepo's play in Toronto. He just wasn't keen enough and lacked the energy to follow through in the rare cases when he got a chance to convert his advantage. In fact, in spite of winning two games with White, this game was the only one for him where he got an advantage out of the opening, which together with the fact that he was in trouble in all his black games, indicates that his preparation left much to be desired. It's really strange how he didn't play any of the three relatively simple moves that guaranteed White a stable advantage.

17.d5 was natural and very good. White fixes the pawn on c7 and his IQP becomes a strength;

17.♖c1 b6 transposes to the advantageous lines analysed after 16...b6;

17.♟c5 was another very good option. 17...b6 18.♟e6 ♟xe6 19.♖xe6 b5 20.♟b3 and Black is very passive while White can press without any risk.

17...f5 Black is out of the woods now.

17...b6 was another good move for Black. 18.d5 f5 19.♟g3 ♟b7= attacks the pawn on d5 and after 20.♟xf5 ♞xd5 21.♞xd5 ♟xd5 the game is headed for a draw.

18.♟c5 A move too late.

18...b6 19.♟d3 This move took Nakamura by surprise. It's another relatively soft move by Nepomniachtchi, allowing simplifications and a draw.

19.♟e6 was what he expected and was the more natural continuation. After 19...♟xe6 20.♖xe6 ♟f4 21.♖e5 ♞d7 was Nakamura's intention, with ideas like ...♟g6 and ...♖ad8. (21...♞g5 may be even better, when Black doesn't have problems.)

19...♟b7 19...♞xd4 was possible and it would have led to a draw after 20.♟e5

♞xd1 21.♟xg6+ hxg6 22.♖axd1 ♟b7 23.♖d7 ♖fe8.

20.♟e5 ♞g5 20...♟f4 could have led to an interesting perpetual after 21.f3 ♞g5 22.g3 ♟h3+ 23.♟g2 ♟f4+.

21.d5 Shutting the long diagonal.

21...♖ad8 Nakamura spent 27 minutes on this move.

The simplest way to draw was 21...♟xe5 22.♖xe5 ♖ae8 23.♞d4 ♖xe5 24.♞xe5 ♞f6 25.♞xc7 ♟xd5 with complete equality;

21...♟f4 led to complications after 22.g3 ♟h3+ (22...♟xd5? allows a beautiful combination after 23.♟b3 ♖ad8? 24.♟xd5 ♟xd5 25.♞xd5! ♖xd5 26.♟f7+ winning a piece.) 23.♟g2 (23.♟f1? f4 gives Black a winning attack.) 23...♟f4+ (23...♟xd5+? 24.f3! is suddenly winning for White after 24...♟f4+ 25.♟h1 as his pieces are hanging.) 24.♟f1 avoiding a repetition. 24...♟xd5 25.♟b3 ♞d8 (25...♖ad8? 26.♟xd5 ♟xd5 27.♞xd5! is the same combination based on the weak back rank and the fork on f7.) 26.♖c1 with good compensation for White;

22.♟b3 c5!? Nakamura keeps the game going. The move is risky as now the d5-pawn is a passed one, but on the other hand Black hopes his queenside majority starts moving with ...c4 and then the d5-pawn may lose its support.

22...♟xd5 was the way to draw: 23.♟xd5 ♟xe5 24.♖xe5 c6 with an equal position after Black regains the piece.

23.♟f3 Nakamura was very upset when Nepomniachtchi played this, after having spent a long time calculating other moves and now facing a move that he didn't think was good.

23.♞f3!? b5 24.♖ad1 c4 25.♟c2 ♖d6 leads to a double-edged position;

23.♖xg6+ hxg6 (23...♗xg6 24.♞e6 is good for White.) 24.♗f3 (24.♞e6?! b5 was what Nakamura expected, but this is good for Black.) 24...b5 25.♞e7 ♕a8 26.♗c3 ♗f6 27.♗xc5 ♕xd5 and the position peters out to a draw.

23...♗h5 Nakamura said that if he had more time he would have played 23...♗h6 to continue the game. 24.a4 (24.♞e6?! b5 is good for Black, who threatens ...c4.) 24...♖f4 25.♗c1 ♕xd5 26.♕xd5 ♞xd5 27.♗c4 Nakamura thought this was hard to judge, but felt it was easier to play for White. (27.♖e5!? was also mentioned by Nakamura, with an unclear position.)

24.♖e5 Nepomniachtchi repeats the position and the game ends in a draw.

24.a4 to stop ...b5 was an attempt to play on, but after 24...♖f4 White needs to seek safe haven. 25.♖e5 leads to simplifications and a draw after (25.♞e5?! c4! 26.♕xc4 ♖xg2! weakens the white king and gives Black good compensation after 27.♕xa6 ♕xa6 28.♖xg2 ♗g4+ 29.♖h1 ♞f6) 25...♕xd5 26.♗xh5 ♖xh5 27.♕xd5 ♞xd5 28.♞ad1 ♖f6 29.♞xd5 ♖xd5 30.♞d1 ♖f6 31.♞d6; 24.♞e6?! b5±; 24.♞c1 ♖f4.

24...♗g5 25.♖f3 ♗h5 26.♖e5 ♗g5

1/2-1/2

Nepomniachtchi didn't have the same energy and preparation as in Madrid and this made it very hard to compete for the top places. The fact that he managed speaks volumes of his practical strength and tenacity.

Nepomniachtchi will be disappointed with second place, but looking at his chances, he really had only one (on move 17 in the game with Nakamura). This may well be the motivation for another try in two years.

SUSPICIOUS SURPRISES



The only non-professional in the event fared really well. He followed the same strategy as in Madrid and the result was similar.

Nakamura's strategy was to surprise his opponents in the openings as early as possible, even using suspicious variations with the black pieces. It worked pretty well until the last round, when it counted the most. Perhaps that was the price to pay for being a non-professional.

Nakamura's surprises with the black pieces were indeed unexpected. Take a look at the following ideas:

Fabiano Caruana – Hikaru Nakamura

Candidates Toronto (1), 04.04.2024

1.e4 c5 2.♖f3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♖xd4 ♖f6 5.♖c3 e5?! It has been known for many decades that this is not very good. Caruana managed to remember the best way for White and obtained a stable advantage, but Nakamura managed to escape.

1/2-1/2

Gukesh D - Hikaru Nakamura

Candidates Toronto (6), 10.04.2024

1.e4 c5 2.♟f3 g6 An extremely rare guest at top level.

3.c3 Gukesh was obviously surprised and chooses a safe line.

One can only wonder what Nakamura had in mind after 3.d4; 3.c4 would have almost certainly led to the Maroczy bind, where Black is solid, but it would have been interesting to know which set-up Nakamura had in mind to employ.

3...d5 4.e5 ♟g4 5.♟b5+ ♜c6 6.♟xc6+ The surprise worked. This is slightly premature and it allows Black to equalise.

6.d4 is better, which should give White an advantage.

6...bxc6 7.0-0 c4!? And Nakamura didn't have many problems obtaining good play.

½-½

Praggnanandhaa R - Hikaru Nakamura

Candidates Toronto (11), 17.04.2024

1.d4 d5 2.♟f3 ♟f6 3.c4 c5 This symmetrical way of playing has been used regularly by Mamedyarov and works better when White already has a knight on f3. It was quite a revelation when Nakamura said he would have played ...c5 even in the case of 2.c4 by White.

4.cxd5 cxd4 5.♟xd4 ♟xd5 6.♜c3 ♟xd4 7.♜xd4 a6 8.g3 e5 9.♜b3 ♜c6 10.♟g2 a5 And Black was doing quite alright in the endgame. This was Praggnanandhaa's worst game in the tournament, but that doesn't mean that Nakamura doesn't deserve credit for outplaying his young opponent in the endgame.

0-1

We also saw the delayed Cordell in the game with Nepomniachtchi above.

Things were working well with Black, but his openings with the white pieces were not as effective as in Madrid. He was caught out by Vidit in round two, he didn't achieve anything in his games with Praggnanadhaa and Caruana (in spite of winning the latter), but most importantly, he failed completely in the decisive game of the last round and the whole tournament.

Hikaru Nakamura - Gukesh D

Candidates Toronto (14), 21.04.2024

1.d4 For the first time in the tournament, Nakamura opens with 1.d4.

1...d5 2.c4 dxc4 The first surprise for Nakamura. Curiously enough, the QGA was also Nakamura's choice in the last round of the Madrid Candidates when he faced Ding Liren, with a draw securing him second place. The opening worked well but Nakamura lost an endgame he shouldn't have.

3.♜f3 ♟f6 4.e3 e6 5.♟xc4 ♟e7!? The second surprise, to which Nakamura didn't find a response that would have given him a position with chances to have a game.

6.♜c3 Possibly premature. It was better to castle, keeping the options open for the queenside.

6...c5 7.a3 Again showing his cards too early. Castling offered more options.

7...0-0 8.0-0 a6 9.♟e2 A choice dictated by the tournament situation.

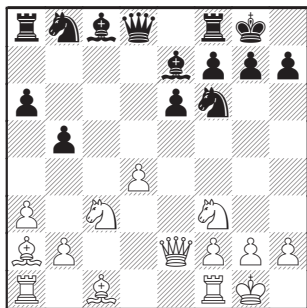
9.dxc5 ♟xd1 10.♜xd1 ♟xc5 11.♟e2 with the idea of b4 would have been Nakamura's choice if he wasn't obliged to play for a win at all costs.

9...b5 10.♟a2 cxd4 The safest choice.

10...♙b7 11.dxc5 ♙xc5 12.e4 ♖c7 13.e5 ♜fd7 is unclear, but definitely a position White would have enjoyed as it offers good chances for a full fight;

10...♜bd7 11.e4 ♙b7 12.e5 ♜g4 13.d5 is another messy line, something White would have relished.

11.exd4



Nakamura spent 10 minutes on this recapture, but this allows Black to sterilise the position.

11.♙d1!? was what Nakamura thought he should have played. 11...b4 (11...♜c6 12.exd4 and White has d5-ideas at his disposal; 11...d3 12.♙xd3 ♖c7 Nakamura didn't like the symmetrical structure for a must-win game, but this was still better than the position he got in the game.) 12.♙xd4 (or 12.axb4 ♜c6 13.♜xd4 ♖c7 14.♜xc6 ♖xc6 15.e4 with a bit more play than in the game.) 12...♖c7 13.axb4 ♜c6 14.♙c4 was a line Nakamura considered.

11...b4! The move that sealed Gukesh's win in Toronto. Nakamura was already very disappointed after this move. The move has already been played before, but neither player was aware of that during the game.

12.♜e4 12.axb4 ♜c6 ensures that Black regains the pawn and establishes control over the blockading square on d5. 13.♙c4

♜xb4 14.♙e3 ♙b7 ½-½ (31) Sadler,M (2630)-Sokolov,I (2637) Netherlands 2000

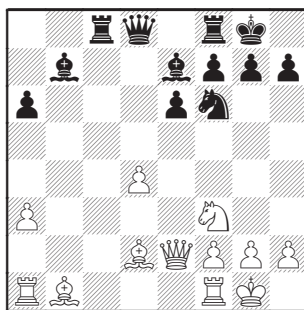
12...bxa3 13.bxa3 In retrospect, Nakamura thought he should have gambled with 13.♜xf6+ ♙xf6 14.♙b1 axb2 15.♖xb2 but Black doesn't really run risks in the line given by Nakamura after 15...♙d7 16.♜e5 ♙b5 17.♙e1 ♜d7 18.♙a3 ♜xe5 19.dxe5 ♙e7 20.♙h3 g6 which is already much better for Black as it's hard to play for White and White can also lose. Nakamura thought that the risk/reward ratio wasn't there.

13...♙b7 14.♜c3 He didn't want to make this move, but wasn't sure what to do.

14...♜d5 15.♙d2 15.♜e4 ♜f6 is a repetition.

15...♜xc3 16.♙xc3 ♜d7 17.♙b1 Nakamura already didn't like where things were going.

17...♙c8 18.♙d2 ♜f6



Black established control over the d5-square and is objectively better. Even more importantly, he cannot possibly lose this position and White has zero chances for anything more than a draw. This was the end of Nakamura's chances and in spite of the fact that the game continued until move 71, the rest was only keeping the game going for the sake of it.

½-½

Like Nepomniachtchi, it's hard for Nakamura to blame himself. He simply didn't have a chance as the opening didn't work out.

On the brighter side, he won five games, the same number as the winner.

Nakamura won three games in a row in rounds 10-12. However, unlike in Madrid, where he was ruthless when it came to converting his advantage, in Toronto he often allowed chances to his opponents. Here's an example from his game with Firouzja.

Hikaru Nakamura - Alireza Firouzja

Candidates Toronto (12), 18.04.2024

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.exd5 The exchange French turned out to be quite popular, but in several games it arose from the Petroff after the moves **1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘f6 3.♗xe5 d6 4.♗f3 ♗xe4 5.d3 ♗f6 6.d4 d5**. Nakamura already entered it like that in his game against Abasov.

3...exd5 4.♗f3 ♗d6 5.c4 ♗f6 5...dxc4 is a major alternative, after **6.♗xc4 ♗f6** White has a choice between **7.0-0** (and **7.♖e2+**).

6.c5 Nakamura doesn't allow Black to play ...c6 and keep the bishop on the h2-b8 diagonal.

6...♗e7 7.♖a4+ Provoking either ...c6 or ...♗d7.

7.♗d3 0-0 8.0-0 ♗g4 9.h3 ♗h5 10.♗e3 was played in the game Ju,W (2549)-Firouzja,A (2759) Wijk aan Zee NED 2024, analysed in the February issue of BCM.

7...♗d7 8.♖c2 0-0 9.♗e3 ♗c6 10.♗c3 b6 A move that took Nakamura out of book. The game becomes very sharp now as Black tries to blow up White's centre.

11.♗e2 ♗b4 11...bxc5 12.dxc5 d4 13.♗xd4 ♗b4 14.♖d2 ♗xc5 15.0-0 is better for White, who has the better structure.

12.♖d2 ♗f5 Threatening ...♗c2.

13.♖c1 ♗g4 14.♗f4 It was in fact possible to let Black take on e3 after **14.0-0 ♗xe3 15.fxe3** because after **15...bxc5 16.dxc5** White threatens ♗d4.

14...bxc5 15.dxc5 ♗xc5 16.0-0 White sacrificed a pawn, but all Black's pieces are loose and unstable. The position is extremely tactical.

16...♖e8 16...♗f6 17.♗g5 d4 18.♗b5 this move is key to exposing Black's position - everything hangs now. **18...d3 19.♖xc5 dxe2 20.♖e1!** (20.♖xe2? ♗d3 wins for Black.) **20...♖xd2** (or **20...♗d3 21.♖xf5 ♗xe1 22.♗xe1 ♖xd2 23.♗xd2** and the pawn on e2 will fall sooner or later.) **21.♗xd2 ♗bd5 22.♗xc7** when White will emerge with an extra pawn when the pawn on e2 is captured.

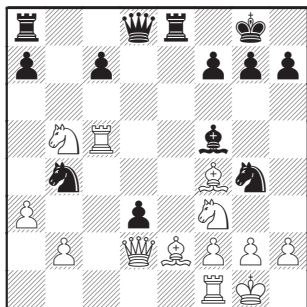
17.a3 d4?! Objectively not the best move, but definitely a tempting one.

17...♗xf2! was best. **18.♖xf2 ♗xf2+ 19.♗xf2 ♖xe2+! 20.♗xe2** (or the strange looking **20.♗xe2 ♗d3 21.♖a1** where White is a piece up, but Black has compensation.) **20...♗d3+ 21.♗g3 ♗xc1 22.♖xc1** Nakamura thought he was better here, but it is only a marginal advantage;

17...♗c6? 18.♗b5 White is winning.

18.♗b5 d3 Here **18...♖xe2?** doesn't work in view of **19.♖xe2 ♗d3 20.♖d2 ♗xb5 21.♖xc5 ♗xf1 22.♖xb4 ♗a6 23.♗xc7** and White should be winning after picking up the pawn on d4.

19.♖xc5?



Based on a misevaluation of the correct move.

19.♔d1! was best. A lot of calculation and precise evaluation was required to enter these lines. 19...♖a6 (19...♗e2!? 20.♙xe2 dxe2 21.♖xc5! (21.♗xe2?! ♙xf2+! allows Black to save himself after 22.♖xf2 ♖d3 23.♖fd4 ♖gxf2 24.♖xf5 ♖xf4 25.♗f3 ♖d3 26.♖xc7 h6 which is unclear, but this is a very difficult line to see.) 21...exf1♗+ 22.♙xf1 ♔d3+ 23.♙g1 ♙xb5 24.♙xb5 White has the better structure and pieces, which give him a clear advantage.) 20.♖xc7! ♖xc7 21.♖xc5 ♖d5 Nakamura wasn't sure whether he was better here. In fact, he is, after the only move 22.♙b3?! (22.♙g6 and Nakamura correctly thought Black was OK) 22...♖xc7 (22...♗d7 23.♗a5! is winning, though not easy to understand that with still a lot of pieces scattered over the board.) 23.♖xf5 ♖f6 24.♖e5 and the pawn on d3 is a weakness rather than a strength.

19...dxe2 20.♖e1 ♖d3 21.♖xf5 ♖xe1? A tactical mistake by Firouzja.

21...♗d7! Nakamura wasn't sure what was happening after this move. He spent 25 minutes on 19.♖c5 calculating this move. 22.♖bd4 (22.♖c5 leads to yet another long and complicated takes-takes variation after 22...♖ad8 23.♙xc7 ♖xc5 24.♙xd8 ♗xd2 25.♖xd2 ♖d3 26.♖c7 ♖xe1 27.♖xe8 ♖d3 28.♖f3 ♖ge5 29.♙a5 ♖xf3+ 30.♖xf3 ♖xb2 which should end in a draw.) 22...♖xe1 23.♗xe1 ♖e4 24.h3 g6! 25.♖g5 ♖xf4 26.♖xg4 ♖xg4 27.hxg4 ♖e8 and when White takes the pawn on e2 Black takes a

pawn elsewhere, with good counterplay: 28.♖xe2 ♗b5 29.♖fd4 ♗xb2.

22.♖xe1 White has a stable advantage now.

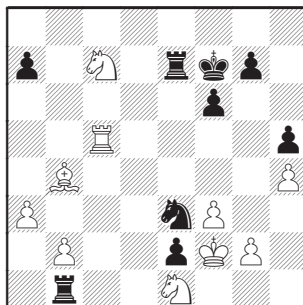
22...♗xd2 23.♙xd2 ♖ad8 24.♙c3 ♖d1 25.f3 ♖e3 26.♖xc7! For the time being, Nakamura is his usual ruthless self when converting an advantage.

26...♖e7 27.♖c5 f6 28.♙b4! 28.♙f2? ♖c1! and thanks to the threat of ...♖d1 Black wins!

28...♙f7 29.h4 h5 30.♙f2? A mistake, but neither player saw the refutation.

30.♖c6 should win the game for White.

30...♖b1?



30...♖xe1! neither player saw this idea - Nakamura. 31.♙xe1 ♖d1+ 32.♙g3 ♖xb2 threatening ...♖d3. 33.♖c3 ♖d7! still intending ...♖d3. 34.a4 ♖d3 35.♖xd3 ♖xd3 36.a5 ♖d7 the strong pawn on e2 and the lack of coordination of the white pieces should help Black draw the endgame.

31.♖d5 White is winning again.

31...♖d1+ 32.♙g3 ♖e5 33.♖d3 ♖e8 34.♙e1? A horrible move based on miscalculation, played after 2 minutes.

34.♖c7+ ♙g8 35.♖e7+ ♙h7 36.♖f4 as indicated by Nakamura. 36...♖xb2 37.♖f5 creating mating threats. 37...♖g8 38.♙e1

when White can keep the e2-pawn under control and go after the a7-pawn; 34.♖f4 was another winning move.

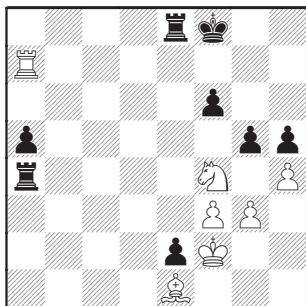
34...♙xb2 35.♖b5 35.♙c7+ still kept some advantage, but the win is no longer possible after 35...♙g8.

35...♖d1! The position is a draw now.

36.♖xb2 ♖xd3 37.♖b7+ ♙f8! The move was missed by Nakamura. Now White cannot save the a3-pawn.

37...♙g8? was what he was looking at 38.♙e7+ ♙h7 (or 38...♙f7 39.♙c6+ ♙g6 40.♖xa7) 39.♖xa7 and White wins thanks to the passed a-pawn.

38.♙f4 ♖xa3 39.♙f2 a5 40.♖a7 ♖a4 41.g3 g5?



Played after five minutes. Nakamura couldn't imagine what was going on in Firouzja's head to play like this. Perhaps he thought he was lost and just lashed out.

41...♖a3! was one of the drawing moves. 42.♙xh5 (42.♖xa5 ♖xa5 43.♙xa5 ♖b8 44.♙xe2 ♖b5 is a drawn endgame.) 42...♖ee3 43.f4 ♖f3+ 44.♙xe2 ♖ae3+ 45.♙d2 ♖d3+ 46.♙c2 ♖a3 with a likely repetition;

41...♖a2? was in fact losing, even though Nakamura was worried about this and didn't see how to play for a win. 42.♙xh5! (42.♖xa5 ♖xa5 43.♙xa5 ♙f7 44.♙xe2

g6 Nakamura saw this.) 42...♖e5 43.♙f4! should win for White, though this is not immediately obvious. White combines threats against Black's king with the advance of his pawns there while at the same time trying to capture one of Black's passed pawns. (43.♙xg7? ♖e7 44.♖xe7 ♙xe7 45.♙f5+ ♙f7= Nakamura correctly thought this was a draw.);

41...♖a1! was another drawing move. 42.♙xh5 ♖b8! 43.♙f4 a4 44.♙xe2 a3 and Black's far-advanced a-pawn guarantees a draw.

42.hxg5 fxg5 43.♙xh5 Now White is winning and Black doesn't get any more chances.

43...♖e5 44.g4 White stabilises the position and turns his attention to the a5-pawn.

44...♙e8 45.♙g7+ ♙f8 46.♙f5 ♖a2 47.♖a8+ ♙f7 48.♙d6+ ♙e6 49.♙c4 ♖b5 50.♖xa5 ♖bxa5 51.♙xa5 ♙d5 52.♙e3 Next the pawn on e2 will fall and Firouzja resigned.

1-0

Some of these mistakes can be excused because of the extremely complex lines the players had to navigate, but these complexities require so much energy and focus that the players are simply not capable of maintaining those for the whole duration of the game, thus leading to drops in concentration and mistakes.

Nakamura was content that he was in a chance to win the tournament until the last round. It was good news for his followers and it made for good content. His post-game recaps were very informative, especially if one could read between the lines. It was good for the chess world to have Nakamura in the Candidates. It will be good to have the Nakamura in the Candidates again, but whether that will happen, it remains to be seen. Two years is a long time.

AN EXCEPTIONAL ACHIEVEMENT!



Gukesh (9 out of 14)

The winner is always deserved, but to expect the youngest player to ever qualify for a World Championship match to show such stability in a tournament like the Candidates is exceptional.

In the above analysis we noted that all the three players who shared second place had their ups and downs. Gukesh didn't have them. In fact, Gukesh had only one inferior position, against Caruana in round four, which he defended confidently. In the game he lost, to Firouzja, he was pressing for a win and only blundered in severe time trouble. In all the other games he was either pressing himself or had no problems.

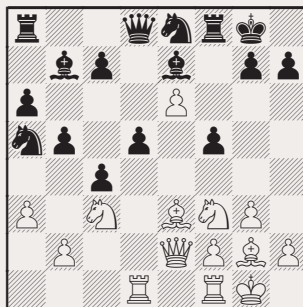
While an elite grandmaster, Gukesh is still only 17! To show such a high level in such an important event is even frightening: imagine the heights he could reach in the next years!

Gukesh started the tournament by introducing an imaginative idea as early as move nine in the Tarrasch Defence. Vidit reacted well and the game was drawn in

21 moves by repetition. The tone for the tournament was set in round two in the game against Praggnanandhaa. We saw the opening of that game above and here we will see the remainder:

Praggnanandhaa R - Gukesh D

Candidates Toronto (2), 05.04.2024



16. ♖e5 ♜f6 The position is very difficult to play for both sides. Objectively it is balanced and the result is decided by the players' calculation abilities.

17. ♚c2?! This allows Black to obtain an advantage with a positional queen sacrifice.

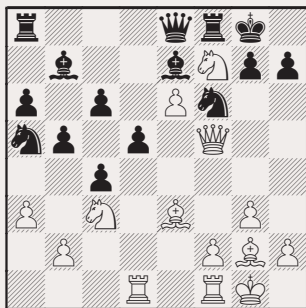
17. ♜f6! kept the balance. The last piece is included in the battle and after something like **17... ♚d6 18. ♜d7! ♚xe6 (18... ♜xd7? loses to 19. ♜f4! ♜e5 20. ♜xd5! ♚xe6 21. ♚xe5 ♚xe5 22. ♜xe5 and White's pieces dominate the whole board.) 19. ♜xf6+ ♜xf6 20. ♜xd5** White has good compensation for the two pawns as his pieces are better coordinated;

17. ♜g5!? was another move that was possible. After **17... ♚e8 18. ♜d7 c6** the position looks just too random and impossible to calculate, which translates to 0.00 in engine-talk.

17... c6?! Gukesh solidifies the d5-pawn, but allows White to take on f5 and to continue to muddy the waters.

17...c5! threatening ...d4 was strong. After 18.♖xd5 ♗xd5 19.♞xd5 ♘xd5 20.♞d1 ♕xe6! is a powerful queen sacrifice. 21.♞xd8 ♞axd8 Black has two rooks and two pawns for the queen and in addition to the material advantage he successfully managed to kill off White's dynamic potential.

18.♞xf5 ♞e8 19.♗f7?!



Praggnanandhaa rushes. It was better to include the rook in the game with 19.♞fe1.

19...♕c8 Gukesh improves the position of the bishop, which became useless after ...c6.

The exchange sacrifice 19...♞xf7! was quite good for Black. 20.exf7+ ♞xf7 21.♗e2 ♞e8 with ...♕c8 next and Black is much better.

20.♞fe1 ♗b7 Now it's time for the knight to join the game, but again the exchange sacrifice on f7 gave Black an advantage.

21.♕g5?! After a long thought Praggnanandhaa decides against a sacrifice on d5, but in fact both sacrifices on d5 were quite promising for him. Admittedly, the lines are hair-raising, so it's hard to blame him for failing to navigate them.

21.♞xd5!? cxd5 22.♗xd5 White has a pawn for a rook, but the compensation is present as Black's forces are not coordinated, unlike White's. 22...♕xe6! (22...♞xf7!? 23.exf7+ ♞xf7 24.♞e5 ♕d8∞ now it's "only" a

piece, but White has compensation in this completely unclear position.) 23.♗h6+ ♖h8 24.♞xe6 ♕xa3!? another crazy shot, though not the only move. 25.♗c7! ♞xe6 26.♗xe6 ♕b4 everything is hanging: the rook on e1, the knight on h6, the rook on f8, the knight on b7! 27.♞d1 and eventually it should peter out to a draw;

21.♗xd5!? cxd5 22.♞xd5 ♞xf7.

a) 22...♗xd5?! is good for White after 23.♕xd5 ♗d6 24.♞g4 ♗xf7 25.exf7+ ♞xf7 26.♞e4! ♞b8 27.♕f4 when White is a rook down, but has a tremendous initiative that will result in getting some material back;

b) or the insane 22...♕b4 23.♕d2! (23. axb4? ♕xe6 wins for Black.) 23...♕xd2 24.♞xd2 ♞a7 25.g4! and Black has enough compensation for the piece;

23.exf7+ ♞xf7 24.♞e5 ♕f8 25.♕g5! ♕d7 26.♕xf6 gxf6 27.♞f4 and the position remains unclear.

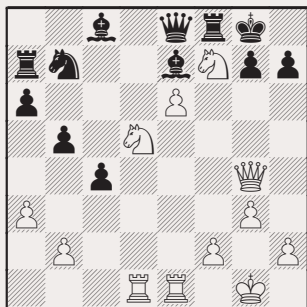
21...♞a7?! Missing a very complicated chance.

21...♗c5 activating the knight and targeting the e6-pawn was better, but the lines are still very irrational. 22.♕xf6 ♕xe6! (22...♕xf6 is possible, where both sides have to come up with 23.♗xd5! cxd5 24.♞xd5 ♕xe6! 25.♞xc5 ♞xf7 26.♞xe6! ♞ac8 resulting in an equal position.) 23.♗h6+! ♖h8! (23...gxh6? 24.♞xe6 ♗xe6 25.♞xe6+ ♞f7 26.♞g4+ ♞g6 27.♞xg6+ hxg6 28.♕xe7 and in a surprising twist, White is up in material with a winning position.) 24.♕xe7! the queen sacrifice is the best chance. (24.♕xg7+ ♖xg7 25.♞xe6 ♗xe6! 26.♞xe6 ♖h8 and White's attack has run out of steam.) 24...♞xe7! and not accepting it is Black's best! (24...♕xf5 25.♕xc5 ♞g6 26.♗xf5 ♞xf5 27.♕xf8 ♞xf8 is an unclear mess.) 25.♞e5 ♞a7 the mess goes on, but the knight on h6 is trapped and Black still has the big central pawn mass, giving him the advantage.

22.♙xf6 ♖xf6 23.♙xd5! This time Pragganandhaa strikes on d5.

23...cxd5 24.♘xd5 ♙e7 24...♙xb2 could have led to a curious repetition after 25.♙c2 ♙xa3 26.♘c7 ♙e7 27.♘d5 ♙e8 28.♘c7.

25.♙g4?



A mistake in time trouble, after which White is lost.

25.♘h6+! gxh6 (25...♙h8 26.♘f7+ ♙g8 27.♘h6+ is a repetition.) 26.♙g4+ ♙g5 (26...♙h8 27.♙d4+ ♙g8 28.♘xe7+ ♙xe7 29.♙xa7 ♙c5 the only way, otherwise White would win with the passed pawn and the centralised rooks. 30.♙xc5 ♘xc5 31.♙d6 ♘xe6 32.♙dxe6 ♙xe6 33.♙xe6 with a drawn rook endgame.) 27.h4 ♘d8! 28.hxg5 ♙g7 and the complications continue.

25...♘d8! Gukesh was also in time trouble, but he made all the best moves from now onwards.

26.♘xd8 26.♙d4 ♘xe6 27.♘h6+ gxh6 28.♙xa7 ♙c5 and Black wins.

26...♙xd8 27.♙d4 ♙b7 28.♙e4 ♙f6 Black slowly untangles and White runs out of threats.

29.♙e3 ♙e7 30.h4 ♙c6 31.h5 ♙c5 32.♙g5 ♙xe6 33.h6 ♙xf2

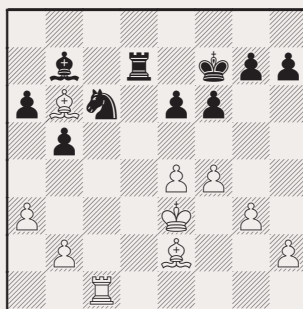
0-1

An impressive game between the two Indian prodigies.

Gukesh showed better nerves and calculation in an extremely sharp and irrational game. The early win set the course for Gukesh and in the next round, he masterfully outplayed Nepomniachtchi from an equal queenless position after the opening. He missed an excellent opportunity to inflict the first defeat on the previous Challenger.

Gukesh D - Ian Nepomniachtchi

Candidates Toronto (3), 06.04.2024



White carefully nurtured his advantage to a winning one, but in order to win he had to see the tactical solution.

30.♙d1? Gukesh missed the only chance.

30.a4! was the winning idea. After 30...bxa4 31.♙c4 the threat is f5. 31...♘d8 and here 32.b4! is the hidden tactic that wins for White, though he had a sensible alternative in 32.♙a1, keeping the big advantage. The point of the move is that 32...axb3? 33.♙xb3 wins on the spot thanks to the threat of ♙xd8 and ♙c7, winning a piece, while 33...♙a8 34.♙a4 is another problem for Black.

30...♙xd1 31.♙xd1 g6 Black is still under pressure, but Nepomniachtchi managed to set up a fortress after

32.♔c5 h5 33.b3 ♘c8 34.a4 e5! 35.axb5 axb5 And the game was drawn after

36.f5 ♖g7 37.fxc6 ♘g4 38.♔c2 ♘e6 39.♔d2 b4 40.♘d1 ♖xc6

½-½

The next game with the black pieces against Caruana was the only one in the whole tournament where Gukesh was on the defensive. He showed himself to be very resilient and defended confidently.

The game against Abasov showed the strength of Gukesh's character. He outplayed Abasov and was winning, but in time trouble before the first time control, he lost all the advantage. Through sheer will and determination, he kept on playing and managed to win the game for a second time, this time converting in 87 moves after his opponent missed the last drawing chance on move 83.

The only game Gukesh lost was against Firouzja in round seven. It was a tense game where Gukesh took advantage of Firouzja's reckless play. Playing for a win he sacrificed a piece, but time trouble was again his main problem. With only seconds left he made the losing mistake on move 36 and was mated.

What happened after the game was more important than the loss itself. As Gukesh said after the tournament, he felt "at his best" after this loss! How many players could say that after a devastating loss in a Candidates tournament which knocked him off the first place? Speaking about the strength of character!

Gukesh continued unperturbed and in the next round outplayed Vidit with the black pieces to return to +2.

A series of three draws followed, against Praggnanandhaa, Nepomniachtchi and

Caruana, all of them balanced games without chances for more.

The second win against Abasov was similar to the first one. With willpower and determination Gukesh pushed hard and outplayed his opponent from an equal endgame, this time with the black pieces.

The decisive game for the tournament victory was in the penultimate round.

Gukesh D - Alireza Firouzja

Candidates Toronto (13), 20.04.2024

1.e4 e5 Firouzja wasn't very successful with the Sicilian, losing both games, so in this game sticks to the safest choice of the Berlin.

2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♘b5 ♘f6 4.d3 Only Nepomniachtchi went for the endgame and won against Vidit. Gukesh prefers to keep the queens on the board for the time being.

4...♔c5 5.0-0 Nakamura played 5.c3 against Vidit, in order to avoid Black's next. On the other hand, playing 5.c3 allows the plans with ...d5, so both moves have their pros and cons.

5...♘d4 6.♘xd4 ♘xd4 7.♘d2 c6 8.♔c4 d6 9.c3 ♘b6 10.♘b3 a5 The moves 10...h6 and 10...0-0 are more frequent, but the idea with ...a5 has been employed by Aronian.

11.♘c4 ♘a7 This is the point of the move 10...a5 - the bishop gets a square to remain on the more active g1-a7 diagonal.

12.♘e3 The following game demonstrated that it's very dangerous for White to grab the pawn on a5: **12.a4 0-0 13.♔g5 h6 14.♘xf6 ♖xf6 15.♘xa5?! d5! 16.♔c2 dxe4 17.dxe4 ♖d8 18.♖e1 ♖g5** with excellent compensation that Aronian managed to convert in the game Carlsen,M (2850)-Aronian,L (2781) Reykjavik 2015;

12.♔h1 a4 13.♕c2 ♘g4 also gave Black the initiative in the game: Karjakin,S (2754)-Aronian,L (2772) Bucharest 2019.

12...0-0 13.♖f3 d5 Black achieved excellent play already.

14.♕c2 White covers the d3-square.

The importance of the d3-square is seen after 14.♘f5 ♕xf5 15.♖xf5 dxe4 16.dxe4 ♖d3! and the queen attacks both the e4-pawn and targets the c3-pawn after 17.♞e1 a4! 18.♕d1 a3 with initiative for Black.

14...g6 Black stops ♘f5.

15.♞e1 A standard move, though it's clear that White doesn't have any active options because of Black's pawn centre.

15...♕e6 Black is developed now and ready for an advance with ...d4 or ...a4-a3. He also has options to play on the kingside by removing the knight from f6 and expanding with ...f5.

16.exd5 Gukesh decides to release the tension in order to stop Black's ideas on both sides.

16...cxd5 17.h3 Controlling the g4-square, thus allowing the knight from e3 to drop back to f1.

17...♞e8 Black prepares the central advance ...e4, so he places the rook on the e-file.

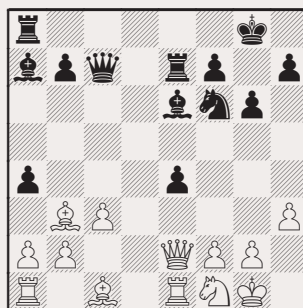
18.♕a4 e4 19.dxe4 dxe4 20.♖e2 ♞e7 21.♘f1 White would like to play ♕e3 in order to exchange the strong bishop on a7. **21...♖c7** A good prophylactic move, intending to meet ♕e3 with ...♕c4.

22.♕b3 To illustrate: 22.♕e3?! ♕c4! and the queen is short of squares, for example 23.♖c2? b5 24.♕b3 ♕xf1 25.♞xf1 a4 loses a piece;

22.♕b5 was a possible alternative to the game move, preventing ...♕c4 but at the

same time discouraging ...a4, which can be met by c4.

22...a4!?



Black takes space on the queenside and can use the a-pawn to damage White's queenside structure with a further ...a3.

23.♕xe6 23.♕xa4? loses to 23...♕c4 24.♖c2 ♕xf1 25.♞xf1 ♕b8 and suddenly the attack on the kingside cannot be defended against: 26.g3 ♘h5 when even the rook from a8 can join the attack via the fifth rank.

23...♞xe6 24.♕e3 White managed to achieve the idea to neutralise the bishop on a7.

24...a3 Black establishes a pawn on a3 which if left alive can become a strong pawn in an endgame.

25.c4 White has a pawn majority on the queenside, so he sets it moving forward.

25...♘h5 Black tries to do the same on the kingside.

26.g3 This takes control of the f4-square.

26.bxa3 eliminates the annoying pawn and it was a good alternative. 26...♘f4 (or 26...♕xe3 27.♘xe3 ♘f4 28.♖c2 ♘d3 29.♞e2 ♞xa3 30.♘d5 ♖c5 with a balanced position with both knights having excellent outposts.) 27.♕xf4 ♖xf4

28.♖ab1 with an equal position where Black's active bishop is neutralised after ♗e3 and play along the b-file.

26...♙c5 26...axb2 27.♖xb2 gives White play on the b-file as compensation for the isolated pawns on a2 and c4.

27.b3 Gukesh avoids the damage to his structure after ...axb2.

27...f5 Black activates the kingside majority. Now White needs to be careful so as not to end up with a weak king after a possible opening of the kingside after ...f4.

28.♙xc5 ♖xc5 29.♖ad1 White's counterplay is based on control of the d-file and the strong outpost on d5.

29...♖f8 The immediate 29...f4 was possible. After 30.♖g4 ♖f6 31.♖e2 White defends successfully and will continue with ♖d5 next.

30.♖d5 Gukesh keeps more tension in the position.

30.♖d2 f4 31.♖d5 would have forced the exchange of queens, when the danger of a kingside attack evaporates.

30...♖e7 31.f4! This move allows Black a protected passed pawn on e4, but that pawn is blockaded on the e3-square. More importantly, now the f-file cannot be opened and this reduces the danger to the white king. If Black is to continue his kingside play he must try to open the g-file now.

31...♗f6 32.♖d2 g5 Black is consistent with his kingside play.

32...e3!? was an interesting tactical idea, freeing the e4-square for the knight. 33.♖d3 ♖e8 34.♖xe3 ♖c5 35.♖d3 looks dangerous for White, as he is pinned on the g1-a7 diagonal, but in fact Black cannot increase the pressure.

33.♗e3 The knight is ideal on e3, blockading the passed pawn and targeting the d5-outpost and the pawn on f5.

33.fxg5?! while possible, it gives Black too much free play after 33...♗d7

33...gxf4 34.gxf4 ♖f7 35.♗h2 35.♗xf5? ♗h5! wins for Black, who crashes through with the attack after ...♖g6 or ...♗xf4.

35...♗h5 36.♖f2 White's kingside is safe and the position continues to be balanced.

36...♖g6 37.♖d5 ♗g7 38.♖ed1 White covered his kingside and now has threats of his own along the d-file, intending ♖d7.

38...♖h6 The only move for Black, freeing the path for the queen to the h5-square.

39.♖g1 The players now repeat moves in order to reach the time control.

39.♖d6!? is a constructive idea for White, who would favour an exchange of one pair of rooks, which would decrease Black's attacking potential. 39...♗e6 40.♖g1+ ♗h8 the position remains equal, but also quite tense.; 39.♖d7 ♖h5 40.♖g2 ♖g6 41.♖f2 ♖h6 is a repetition.

39...♖g6 40.♖gd1 ♖h6 41.♖g1 ♖g6 42.♖h4! The decisive moment in the tournament. After spending 15 minutes, Gukesh decides to continue the game in spite of having no advantage and the position remaining balanced. This decision reminds me of Ding Liren's famous 46...♖g6 in the last game of the tie-break in the World Championship match in Astana.

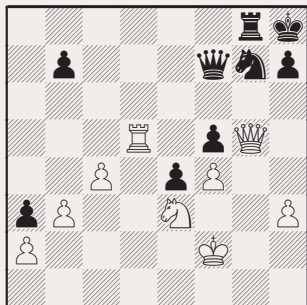
42...♖xg1 43.♗xg1 ♗h8 43...♖g6+ 44.♗f2 ♗e6 45.♖d6 ♗h8 46.♗d5 looks threatening, but after 46...♖g7! Black reminds White that his king is not entirely safe, with a perpetual to follow after 47.♖xe6 ♖d4+ 48.♗e2 ♖d3+.

44.♗f2 ♖g8? For the whole game it was Black who was pressing, even if slightly.

This changed after the time control when it was White who started to press, even if slightly. Unable to adapt, Firouzja errs.

44...♖g6 was still balanced.

45.♖g5?



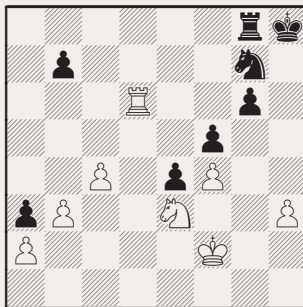
Gukesh misses the first chance. Luckily, as Fate would have it, he will get another one.

45.♖h6! was very strong. Black can barely move. The following is a nice illustration of the helplessness of Black's position: 45...♖e7 46.♔e2 ♖f7 47.♔d2 ♖e7 (47...♖e8 48.♖g5 ♖g8 49.♔d8! and the endgame is winning for White as the white king becomes a strong piece on the queenside.) 48.♔c3 ♖f7 49.b4 and White activates his queenside majority.

45...♖g6? Here comes the second chance. It's a decision that is hard to understand, as White actively sought exchanges, since in the endgame his active king is the decisive factor and here we see Firouzja voluntarily giving Gukesh what he wanted.

45...♔e6! was the only move for Black to save the game. 46.♖xf5 ♖g7 the threats along the g-file and the a1-h8 diagonal are dangerous, so White must exchange queens. 47.♖e5 ♖xe5 48.♖xe5 (or 48.fxe5 ♖f8+ 49.♔e1 ♖f3 with compensation for the pawn, quite sufficient for equality.) 48...♔xf4 49.♖xe4 ♔xh3+ and the endgame is a draw.

46.♖xg6 hxg6 47.♔d6



The endgame is winning for White and Gukesh converts confidently.

47...♖e8 47...♔h7 48.♖b6 ♖b8 49.♔d5 Black defended everything, but after ♔e3, b4, c5 White wins easily.

48.♖xg6 ♔e6 49.♔d5 ♔d4 50.♖b6 ♔c2 Black's only hope is the e-pawn, but White can neutralise it without problems.

51.♖xb7 ♖e6 51...e3+ 52.♔e2 ♔d4+ 53.♔d3 e2 54.♔f6! the only move to win, but it suffices. The threat of mate doesn't give time to Black to promote his pawn. 54...♖e3+ 55.♔xd4 ♖xh3 56.♖e7 controlling the e-pawn and winning.

52.♖e7 Rooks behind pawns.

52...♖h6 53.c5 With the e4-pawn going nowhere, White advances his own passed pawns.

53...♔d4 53...♖xh3 54.c6

54.♔g2 ♖g6+ 55.♔f2 ♖h6 56.b4 White repeated moves to gain some time on the clock and now advances further.

56...♖xh3 57.♔g2 ♖h6 58.♖b7 Intending b5.

58...♔g8 59.b5 ♔f8 60.b6 ♖g6+ 61.♔f2 ♖h6 62.♖c7 ♖h2+ 63.♔g3

1-0

The win was a result of Gukesh’s courageous decision on move 42 to continue the game. His courage was rewarded and this win made him the sole leader before the last round.

The last round games went exactly as he would have liked. He controlled his own game, not allowing any chance to Nakamura thanks to the excellent opening preparation (see the game above) while the roller-coaster game between Caruana and Nepomniachtchi eventually ended in a draw, making Gukesh the winner of the Candidates tournament.

A historic feat for the 17-year-old, a record that it’s hard to see being broken any time soon. To put things into perspective, Magnus Carlsen was 17 in 2007 and most of 2008 (being born at the end of November), but he was very far from winning a Candidates tournament at that age.

A NEW ERA

With Gukesh’s triumph, we can say that the new era of the next generation is already here. Gukesh’s success will motivate his peers to work even harder and achieve new heights. They will keep pushing each other to new heights and as things look now, only the sky is the limit for them.

Ten years after Anand’s last World Championship match India got another World Championship contender. Will he manage to dethrone the so far unimpressive Ding Liren? It’s impossible to say, as Ding will be ready for the match and his level will improve, but who would bet against the young star with his meteoric rise?

STANDINGS OF THE 2024 CANDIDATES TOURNAMENT

Rk	Player	Score	SB	Wins
1	Gukesh D (IND)	9/14	57	5
2	Hikaru Nakamura (USA)	8.5/14	56	5
3	Ian Nepomniachtchi (FIDE)	8.5/14	56	3
4	Fabiano Caruana (USA)	8.5/14	54	4
5	R Praggnanandhaa (IND)	7/14	42.5	3
6	Vidit Gujrathi (IND)	6/14	40.25	3
7	Alireza Firouzja (FRA)	5/14	32.75	2
8	Nijat Abasov (AZE)	3.5/14	25.5	0

Rk	Player	GD	HN	IN	FC	RP	VG	AF	NA
1	Gukesh D (IND)		½ ½	½ ½	½ ½	½ ½	1 ½	1 0	1 1
2	Hikaru Nakamura (USA)	½ ½		½ ½	1 ½	½ 1	0 0	1 1	1 ½
3	Ian Nepomniachtchi (FIDE)	½ ½	½ ½		½ ½	½ ½	1 1	1 ½	½ ½
4	Fabiano Caruana (USA)	½ ½	½ 0	½ ½		½ 1	1 ½	1 ½	1 ½
5	R Praggnanandhaa (IND)	0 ½	0 ½	½ ½	0 ½		½ 1	½ ½	1 1
6	Vidit Gujrathi (IND)	0 ½	1 1	0 0	½ 0	0 ½		1 ½	½ ½
7	Alireza Firouzja (FRA)	1 0	0 0	½ 0	½ 0	½ ½	½ 0		1 ½
8	Nijat Abasov (AZE)	0 0	½ 0	½ ½	½ 0	0 0	½ ½	½ 0	

CHINESE DOMINATION IN THE WOMEN'S CANDIDATES

**FOR THE FIRST TIME EVER,
THE WOMEN'S CANDIDATES
WAS HELD SIDE-BY-SIDE
WITH THE OPEN EVENT**

By GM Aleksandar Colovic
www.alexcolovic.com

Photo: FIDE Official



Unlike their colleagues, who had a tournament which was decided in the last moments of the last round, the women's event had a different dynamic.

For the first time ever, the Women's Candidates was held side-by-side with the Open event. This was done deliberately, to boost women's chess, in light of FIDE's long-term ambitions.

The eventual winner of the Women's Candidates in Toronto, Tan Zhongyi, started with two wins and never relinquished the lead. Her closest competitor was her compatriot Lei Tingjie, who - after a slow start - won three games in a row in the middle of the tournament, including the direct duel, but eventually couldn't keep the pace.

The games were equally complex in the women event and with the women being lower rated by some 150-200 rating points, the mistakes they made were perhaps more easily understood.

Let's see now how each player performed.

MISSED OPPORTUNITIES



Muzychuk (5.5 out of 14)

Muzychuk finished second (behind winner Goryachkina) in the last Candidates tournament that was held in this format. In 2019 she had a slow start but then picked up the pace, won several games and finished a full point ahead of the third-placed Lagno and Tan Zhongyi.

In Toronto, Muzychuk was the player with the most missed wins.

She started slowly again, losing a harmless endgame in round two to Goryachkina because of bad time management: she spent way too much time in a relatively simple endgame, eventually blundering.

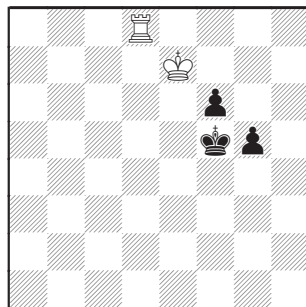
Then, incredible things started to happen.

Muzychuk was winning in the next round against Lagno. The win was very hard to find in a position with only queen and rook for each side where Muzychuk had to hunt down her opponent's king. She couldn't handle the complexity of the variations and the game was drawn.

In the next round, Muzychuk obtained a winning rook endgame against Lei Tingjie which eventually led to a position with rook against two pawns. The winning method in such positions is known, but she missed it.

Anna Muzychuk – Lei Tingjie

Women's Candidates Toronto (4), 07.04.2024



53.♖d5+?? 53.♖g8! rook behind the most advanced pawn and the king walks over - that is the winning method: 53... g4 54.♔f7! White's king is just in time to stop the g-pawn. 54...♔f4 55.♔g6! f5 56.♔h5 ♔g3 57.♖g7! perhaps the most difficult move - Black is in a zugzwang

and has to let the white king approach. (57.♔g5? f4 is a draw.) 57...♔h3 (or 57...♔h2 58.♔h4 ♕g2 59.♖f7 and both pawns are lost.) 58.♕g5! again walking over to the other side. After ♕f4 the rest is easy.

53...♕f4 now the game is drawn.

54.♖xf6 g4 55.♖d4+ ♕f3 56.♖f5 g3 57.♖d3+ ♕f2 58.♕g4 g2 59.♖d2+ ♕f1 59...♕g1! was easier, as 60.♖f3 ♔h1! forces a stalemate or the exchange of all material.

60.♖f3 g1♔+ This is also a draw and the players agreed to it on move 75.

½-½

After that Muzychuk outplayed Vaishali with the black pieces, but again the win was very complicated and Vaishali erected a fortress in a double-rook endgame.

After so many missed wins Muzychuk played badly against Tan Zhongyi and was completely lost when her opponent gave her an unexpected chance by misplaying the mating attack. Alas, Muzychuk missed the drawing chance and lost.

There were more missed wins for Muzychuk. In round 11 she blundered into a perpetual check in a position where she was two pieces up and her opponent only had a queen - she had to return one piece to win, but she allowed a perpetual instead.

With so many missed wins it's impossible to have a good tournament. If a player cannot handle the complexities of the calculations that the winning lines require, that means that either the level of the player is not sufficient, or the player is not in good form. With Muzychuk, it was definitely the latter. She fought the best that she could, but

when things don't go one's way, it's very hard to change the momentum.

A very disappointing result for Muzychuk, who must have hoped for a similar performance as in 2019, but this time it didn't work out.

A SOLID DEBUT



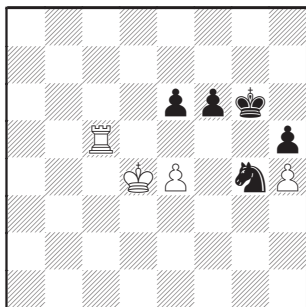
The youngest participant had a decent event. She was her usual, solid, self, playing positional chess and trying to play on technique. However, at this level, her usually dependent technique was misfiring.

The only game where it finished the job was in her only win in the event, against Koneru in round four. It was Salimova's best game, where she outplayed the rating favourite after a wobbly opening.

In her games against Tan, she held an inferior endgame with the black pieces, but missed a straight-forward win with the white. She should have saved the inferior endgame against Goryachkina in round six while probably the biggest blunder of the tournament was in her game against Muzychuk, where both players miscalculated a transposition to a pawn endgame.

Nurgul Salimova - Anna Muzychuk

Women's Candidates Toronto (8), 13.04.2024



The position was a draw for a long time, but now both players blundered horribly.

53...♖e5?? Instead of keeping the knight with 53...♖h2.

54.♞c3?? Just terrible.

54.♞xe5! fxe5+ 55.♔xe5 ♕f7 56.♕f4 ♕g6 (or 56...♕f6 57.e5+ ♕g6 58.♔e4 ♕f7 59.♔d4) 57.e5 ♕h6 58.♔e3! ♕g6 59.♔e4 this triangulation was the only tricky part in the calculation, but far from being hard to see. After all, it's a common theme in pawn endgames and both players must have known about it. 59...♕f7 60.♔d4 ♕e7 (60...♕g6 61.♔c5) 61.♔c5 ♕d7 62.♔b6 and White wins.

54...♕f7 The game continued until move 120, but there was no more excitement.

½-½

The hardest loss to take was against Vaishali in round 10 when Salimova expertly outplayed her opponent, but managed to lose from a position where Vaishali could only move with her king (see the game below).

When it came to tactical fights, Salimova wasn't up to her task. The piece sacrifice that Vaishali essayed in their first game should have led to a draw, but Salimova didn't find the way.

Another problem for Salimova were the openings, or perhaps her memory of the opening preparation. It appeared that in almost every game she misplayed them early on. With the black pieces she expanded her repertoire, adding the Petroff, the Philidor and the Ruy Lopez to her Caro-Kann and they served her well, though she wasn't always precise in the opening. With White she stuck to her favourite Catalan, but found her opponents well prepared.

The tournament was a learning experience for Salimova. If she can raise the level of her calculations and improve her openings, her technique should catch up and then she would become much more competitive at elite level.

A SLOW START AND A DISAPPOINTING FINISH



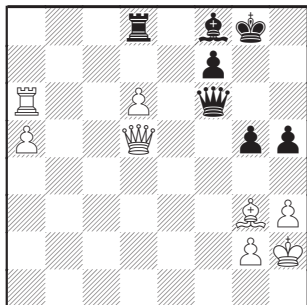
Lagno (6.5 out of 14)

Lagno was one of the pre-tournament favourites. She started the tournament with five draws, but like Muzychuk, she had a lot of missed winning chances in those games. True, she saved a lost game against Muzychuk, but she missed wins (and not too complicated at that) against Koneru, Tan Zhongyi and Lei Tingjie.

The missed win against the eventual winner was particularly painful as it could have sent the tournament in a completely other direction.

Kateryna Lagno – Tan Zhongyi

Women's Candidates Toronto (4), 07.04.2024



White is easily winning with her passed pawns and complete domination. The only slight thing that needs care is the advance of the black h-pawn, but even that is easily dealt with.

49. ♖f3 Possible, but there was a simpler way.

49. ♖b6 freeing the path of the a-pawn was as simple as it can get. After **49...h4 50. ♗e5 ♖f5 51. ♖d4** White moves away from the pin and the a-pawn continues to march forward.

49... ♖g6 50. ♖a8 50. ♗e5 was another simple solution. After **50...g4 (50... ♗xd6 51. ♖xd6 ♗xd6 52. ♖a8+ leads to mate.) 51. ♖g3** White keeps everything under control.

50... ♖xa8 51. ♖xa8 h4 52. ♗e5?? The fatal mistake.

White missed two easy chances and here she had to give up her d6-pawn with **52. ♗f2 ♖xd6+ 53. ♗h1** which still results in an easy win as the white king is safe and the a-pawn will soon decide the game.

52... ♖e6! Now White loses the d6-pawn under much worse circumstances - the game is a draw.

53. ♖e4 ♗xd6 54. ♖a8+ ♗h7 55. ♗xd6 ♖xd6+ 56. ♗h1 ♖d1+

½-½

Lagno won her first game in the next round against Vaishali, but what was true for Muzychuk it was also true for Lagno - with too many missed winning chances it's impossible to have a good tournament.

She continued to draw her games, this time without any winning chances, staying on +1 and in contention. Her hopes were extinguished in round 11 when she first missed a win and then a draw against Tan Zhongyi.

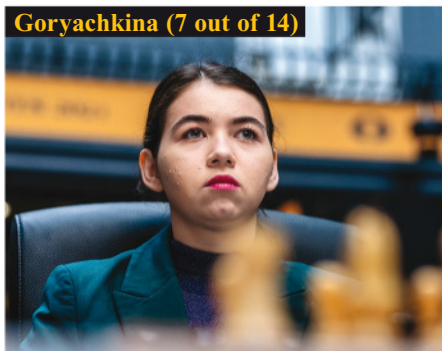
The tournament finished on a sour note for Lagno as in the last round she misplayed a promising attack against Vaishali and lost again.

Lagno was another player who was not in her best form. She kept herself in the top part of the table thanks to her class, but by the end of the event, with fatigue setting in, she dropped her level and lost two games and ended up with a negative score.

What they say about football is applicable to chess, too. If you don't score, you concede. Lagno suffered that fate in Toronto.

A GOOD START ISN'T GOOD ENOUGH

Goryachkina (7 out of 14)



The other pre-tournament favourite finished on 50 percent.

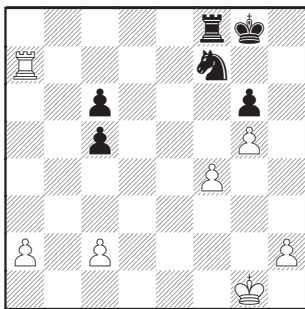
This doesn't tell the whole story of Goryachkina's tournament. In fact, she started well, beating Muzychuk in round two and Salimova in round six, to emerge among the leaders. She was playing in her usual technical style, squeezing out wins in endgames and seemed well on course to challenge for first place.

The turning point in the tournament for Goryachkina were the games in rounds nine and 10.

In round nine she was caught out in the opening by Muzychuk. However, Goryachkina knew the line well and navigated it correctly to an equal endgame. Then Muzychuk misplayed it and gave her opponent a unique opportunity.

Anna Muzychuk – Aleksandra Goryachkina

Women's Candidates Toronto (9), 14.04.2024



Muzychuk took some risks by giving up her bishop for a couple of pawns, but it wasn't a very-well calculated risk because if anybody, it is only Black who can play for a win, in spite of the position being objectively a draw.

33.♖c7? A serious mistake. White makes a panicky move and rushes to pick up the c-pawns.

33.a4 would have drawn the game.

33...♖a8? Tournaments are often decided in a single moment. This one was such for Goryachkina.

33...♘d8! was the winning move. It's natural enough, defending the c6-pawn, so it's hard to say why she didn't play it. Perhaps she didn't believe there were chances left in the position? 34.♖c8 ♘e6 35.♖xf8+ (35.♖xc6 ♘f7 and the king comes to e7 and d6 when Black will start to collect White's weak pawns.) 35...♘xf8 36.a4 ♘e7 and the king will take care of the a-pawn while the knight can defend the kingside.

34.♖xc6 ♘g7 35.♖xc5 And the game was drawn in 45 moves.

½-½

As if to punish Goryachkina, Fate again gave her a knight against her opponent's pawns in the next round against Lei Tingjie. Goryachkina missed the draw on move 61 and lost the game.

Now on only +1, Goryachkina had to play for a win with the black pieces in the next round against Vaishali. She chose the Sicilian, not her usual choice, and wasn't up to date with the latest developments in the Alapin Variation. This landed her in an inferior position, but Vaishali was happy with a draw and on a couple of occasions repeated the moves. Goryachkina kept avoiding the draw but that was to her detriment and she ended up lost. Then she took advantage of Vaishali's mistakes and when the game was about to end in a draw, she blundered horribly on move 64 and lost again.

She ended the tournament with three draws (she was lost against Koneru in round 12 and misplayed an almost winning position against Salimova in round 14) and a 50 percent score.

Goryachkina wasn't in her best form, but in spite of that she was in contention for most of the tournament. It was a definite disappointment for her, though in view of the Chinese domination it would have been very hard even she played better and took all her chances.

FULL-SPEED REVERSE THEN FULL-SPEED AHEAD



The winner of the Grand Swiss had an unreal tournament. Vaishali made only three draws and had a streak of four losses in a row followed by five wins in a row!

After the draw in the first round, she was outplayed from a simple position by eventual winner Tan Zhongyi (see below for the game). In round three she beat Salimova in her trademark tactical style.

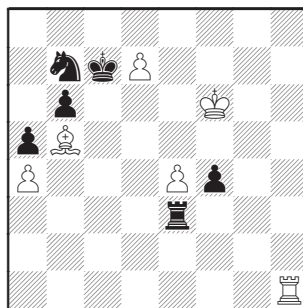
Then the streaks began.

She started to lose games in horrible fashion. She was outplayed both positionally and tactically, missed all her chances even when she had them, like in the game with Koneru where she was completely lost out of the opening, then fought back to a dead draw, but still lost. The worst was the 21-move loss with the white pieces to Tan Zhongyi (see below).

The lucky break came in round 10.

**Nurgyul Salimova –
Vaishali Rameshbabu**

Women's Candidates Toronto (10), 15.04.2024



White is completely winning.

54.e5?? Too hasty.

The final technical touch was required: 54.♖h8 forces the knight on the passive d8 square in view of the threat ♖c8 and after 54...♘d8 55.e5 is safe to play, as Black doesn't have the move ...♘c5 as in the game. 55...f3 56.♖h2 ♘b7 57.e6 and the pawns will promote.

54...♘c5! Black is out of the woods now.

55.♖h7 f3 56.♖e7 f2 57.♙f7 ♖h3 58.e6 ♘b7?? Making the knight passive again cannot possibly be good.

58...♖h7+ 59.♙e8 ♖h8+ is an elementary draw with perpetual check.

59.d8♙+?? White blunders in return.

59.♖e8! is the same motif as on move 54 - White forces the knight on d8. 59...♘d8+ (59...♖h7+ 60.♙g6 *doesn't change anything as now the rook on h7 hangs and there is a threat of ♖c8.*) 60.♖xd8! with e7 next and it's curtains.

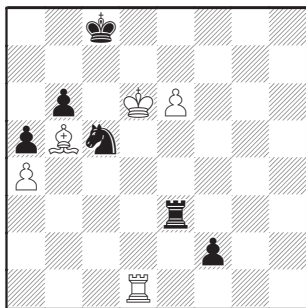
59...♙xd8 Now it's a draw again.

60.♔d7+ Perhaps Salimova forgot that she couldn't take the knight: **60.♖xb7? ♖h7+** drops the rook on b7.

60...♖c8 61.♖d1 ♖f3+ 62.♖g6 ♖e3 63.♖f6 ♖f3+ 64.♖g5 ♖e3 65.♖f6 ♖f3+ 66.♖e7 Salimova still wants to play on, though after so many blunders it would have been more sensible to end the game as soon as possible by repeating.

66...♗c5 67.♗d6?? And here comes the losing blunder. Moves like **67.♖c1** or **67.♖f1** kept the equilibrium.

67...♖e3!



With the double threat of **...♖e1** and **...♖xe6**. Black is winning now.

68.♗d7+ 68.♗c4 ♖e1.

68...♗xd7 69.exd7+ ♗d8 70.♖f1 ♖e2 71.♖c6 ♖e6+! 72.♗d5 ♖f6 Black wins the pawn on d7 and keeps the rook behind the passed pawn, thus immobilising White's rook. Black won in 88 moves.

0-1

After this win Vaishali couldn't be stopped. In the remaining four rounds she beat Goryachkina, Muzychuk, Lei Tingjie and Lagno.

The rise from dead last to shared second with five consecutive wins is one of the greatest comebacks in chess history. Vaishali could pull it off thanks to her resilience and tactical astuteness, as she was usually better attuned to the tactical possibilities hidden in the positions. Her youth was also a contributing factor as fatigue didn't seem to affect her as much.

Another surprising matter is the difference in the level of play during her losing and winning streaks, from very bad to very good within such a short period of time. What exactly clicked for her, how did the lucky break against Salimova change things? These secrets of chess psychology are always hidden from the public eye and the players are never eager to talk about them.

A young player can often feel crushed after heavy losses. The fact that Vaishali not only overcame the losses, but also turned them into wins, speaks a lot about her character and resilience. She comes out of the Toronto Candidates as one of the winners, with a firm belief that the future can only bring her better results and a way forward.

A STEP BEHIND



Lei Tingjie (7.5 out of 14)

In spite of finishing with only +1 and a shared second, Lei Tingjie was the only real competitor to the winner Tan Zhongyi throughout the event.

Lei Tingjie started by losing to Tan Zhongyi in round one with the white pieces. This gave a big confidence boost to Tan Zhongyi, while Lei needed time to get back into the tournament. She made four draws before she started winning games.

She won three games in a row, against Koneru, Vaishali and, most importantly, against Tan Zhongyi.

Tan Zhongyi – Lei Tingjie

Women's Candidates Toronto (8), 13.04.2024

1.d4 d5 2.♘f3 ♘f6 3.♙f4 Tan was the most original player when it came to openings, not minding choosing rare or unusual systems. The London cannot be considered a surprise nowadays, but it seems that Tan Zhongyi wanted to achieve a position similar to her game against Vaishali.

3...c5 4.e3 ♘c6 5.♘bd2 ♙g4 One of the most sound systems against the London for Black. She develops in a reversed QGD fashion. This system has been employed by Radjabov, who was Lei Tingjie's second in Toronto.

6.c3 e6 7.♖b3 ♖c8 8.h3 ♙h5 9.♘h4 ♙e7 10.g4 ♙g6 11.♗xg6 hxg6 12.♙e2 a6 13.h4 It's interesting that in spite of choosing a solid opening, Tan Zhongyi plays in a very aggressive manner.

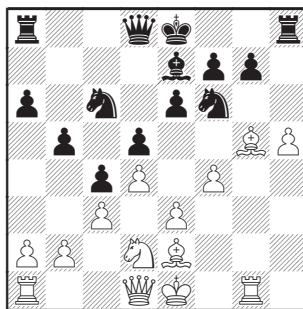
Radjabov's game went **13.dxc5 ♙xc5 14.0-0-0 b5** with unclear play in the game Grischuk,A (2732)-Radjabov,T (2723) Moscow 2023.

13...b5 14.h5 The move **14.g5** is an alternative, but perhaps White didn't want to allow the blockading **14...♘h5**.

14...c4 A committal decision. Black now has to advance **...b5-b4** and open the b-file if she is to obtain any counterplay. **14...cxd4 15.exd4 gxh5 16.gxh5 b4!?** led to more open play, with chances for both sides in a sharp position.

15.♙d1 ♙d8 16.♗g1 gxh5 17.gxh5 ♙d6 18.♙g5 18...♙xd6 ♙xd6 19.♗xg7 ♘e7 with **...♗ag8** next is good for Black as she will likely capture the h5-pawn.

18...♙e7 19.♙f4 ♙d6 20.♙g5 ♙e7 21.f4?!



A characteristic moment. Tan Zhongyi was a full point ahead of Lei Tingjie and it made infinitely more sense to take the draw with the tournament situation into consideration: she keeps the lead and keeps at bay a dangerous opponent who is on a roll. But Tan Zhongyi shows a fighting spirit and decides to continue the game in a position where she is in fact at a disadvantage.

21...♖b8 Black prepares for the opening of the b-file, though the immediate **21...b4** was also possible.

22.a3 a5 23.♙h4?! Tan Zhongyi was getting low on time already.

23.♙f3 ♘h7 24.♙xe7 ♘xe7 25.♙e2 kept the disadvantage at minimum.

23...♙f8 23...♘h5! wins a pawn thanks to the tactic **24.♙xe7 ♙xe7 25.♙h5 ♙h4+**

24.♙g3?! The bishop is truly bad on g3.

It made more sense to get rid of it by **24.♙xf6! ♙xf6 25.♙g4** controlling the f5-square in case Black plays **...♘e7-f5**. With **♘f2** and **♘f3** next, White should be relatively safe.

24...♙d6 25.♙h4 ♘e7! Now Black doesn't repeat. The knight is headed for f5.

26.♙xf6 Two moves too late!

26...gxf6 27.♙f1 b4 Black is better on both sides of the board.

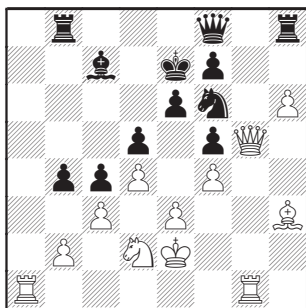
28.axb4 axb4 29.♙h3 f5 30.♖f3 ♙c7 Preparing the activation of the bishop with ...♙a5, which would attack the base of White's pawn chain on c3 (*after the exchange ...bxc3, bxc3*).

31.♙e2 ♘g8 This was part of Black's plan, to transfer the knight to f6 and then likely to e4, but this transfer gives White some chances.

31...♙a5 continuing the transfer of the bishop was stronger. After **32.♖ac1 bxc3 33.bxc3 ♖b2** Black is winning.

32.♖g3 ♘f6 33.h6 ♙e7 33...♖g8?? would be awful: **34.♖xg8+! ♘xg8 35.h7** and White wins.

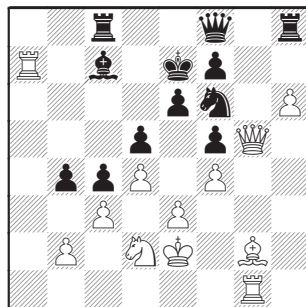
34.♖g5 ♖f8?



One big take away from the Candidates, both open and women, is that the player will inevitably slip up even in winning positions and allow a saving chance.

34...♙d7! 35.♙xf5 ♖g8 36.♖h4 ♖xg1 37.♖xg1 exf5 38.h7 ♖h8 should win for Black, though some play remains.

35.♖a7! ♖c8 36.♙g2?



Tan Zhongyi misses her chance. This was her weakest game in the whole event.

After **36.♙xf5! exf5 (36...♖xh6 37.♙g4 is also unclear.) 37.♖h1!** White is back in the game! The position is a mess after **37...♖g8 38.cxb4 ♖g6 39.♘f3** where the engine says it's 0.00 - total equality.

36...♖xh6 Black eliminated the main danger and is now cruising to victory.

37.♘f3 ♖h5 38.♖g3 ♘e4 39.♖e1 bxc3 40.bxc3 ♖g7 41.♙f1 ♖h8 White is reduced to the last ranks and cannot defend her weaknesses - the c3-pawn, the second rank and ultimately, her king.

42.♖a1 ♙f6 43.♖g2 ♖h3 44.♘e5 ♖h5+ 45.♙e1 ♖xe3+ 46.♖e2 ♖h4+ 47.♙d1 ♖xe2 48.♙xe2 ♖xf4 49.♖b2 ♖h8 50.♙f3 ♖h2 51.♖c1 After **51...♖d2** Black mates, so Tan Zhongyi resigned.

0-1

This win brought Lei Tingjie on equal points with Tan Zhongyi and shared first place.

The race for first continued as Tan Zhongyi won in the next round, but Lei Tingjie kept the pace by winning in round 10 against Goryachkina.

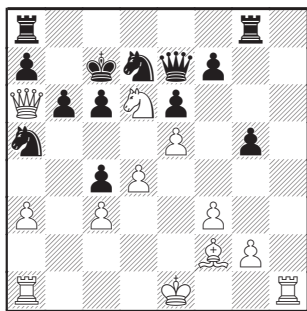
Lei Tingjie missed her biggest chance when she misplayed a winning position against Lagno in

round 12. After that miss she seemed to drop psychologically and she went on to lose the last two games to Vaishali and Koneru, both of whom caught her on 7.5 points.

Worth mentioning is her game against Koneru, which was a spoilt masterpiece.

Lei Tingjie – Koneru Humpy

Women's Candidates Toronto (14), 21.04.2024



The sharp Saemisch Variation of the Nimzo-Indian led to a murky position. As her second later revealed, Lei Tingjie was still in her preparation here.

22.♖h7! Allowing her queen to be trapped!

22...♜b8 23.♙xa5!! Amazing concept. White will have only a piece for the queen, but Black's lack of coordination give White excellent compensation.

23...bxa5 24.♖b1 ♜d7 The only move, otherwise ♜b7 wins.

25.♖b7+ ♜d8 26.♜xf7+? Lei Tingjie couldn't remember the move 26.♜e3! and this was indicated by Radjabov. It's a fascinating position where White presses with a only a bishop for queen and a pawn!

26...♜c8 27.♜d6+ ♙xd6 28.exd6 ♜xb7 29.♖xd7+ ♜a6 Now the position is unclear. Eventually Koneru won in 62 moves.

Lei Tingjie had a very good event, spoilt only by the two losses at the end, when the fight for first place was practically decided. She will have to wait for two more years to try to get another match for the title, but if she manages to keep improving and have a strong second like Radjabov, she has every chance to do so.

TWO HALVES



Koneru had a tournament of two halves. She was horrible in the first, losing two games and drawing the rest, while she had a very good second half, winning three games without a loss.

While she finished tied for second, Koneru was never in contention for the top spots. Her play in the first half was listless and in the games she lost she was outplayed by Salimova and committed a blunder in a drawn endgame against Lei Tingjie.

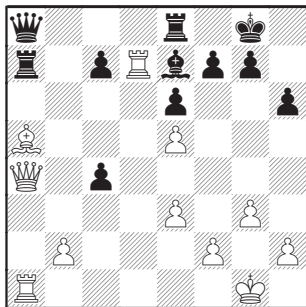
The turning point for Koneru was the game with Vaishali in round eight. It was a strange game: Koneru was winning after the opening, a clear exchange up on move 16. Then, inexplicably, she managed to play so badly to allow Vaishali so much that the position was a draw by move 40. Then Lady Luck finally smiled on Koneru and Vaishali blundered the game away on move 55.

After this win Koneru's game improved tremendously. She raised her level and kept control in her games. She ground down Salimova in an exemplary technical fashion and could have even followed up with

another win if she didn't agree to a draw in a winning position against Goryachkina.

Aleksandra Goryachkina – Koneru Humpy

Women's Candidates Toronto (12), 18.04.2024



White is tied on the a-file. Black had a way to exploit the pin, but short of time Koneru decided to repeat moves and draw.

22...♖b8? 22...♕d8! was the winning move, threatening ...♖a6 and then ...c6 or ...c5, to win the pinned bishop. 23.♖b5 White tries to get out of the pin, but after (23.♖ad1 ♖xa5 24.♖xd8 ♖xa4 leaves Black a rook up after 25.♖xa8 ♖exa8) 23...♖a6 24.♖a3 c6 she cannot defend both the bishop on a5 and the queen on b5. The best chance is 25.♖xa6 but after 25...♖xa6 26.♕xd8 ♖b5- Black should win as she wins another pawn thanks to the double attack on the pawns on e5 and b2.

23.♖dd1 ♖a8 24.♖d7 ♖b8 25.♖dd1

½-½

After the uneventful draw with Muzychuk she beat Lei Tingjie in the last round after surviving the opening scare we saw above.

In spite of the strong finish, it's doubtful that Koneru is happy with her performance. She must have considered herself capable of fighting for first place, whereas she spent the whole event playing catch-up without any chances.

THE STRONGEST CANDIDATE



Tan Zhongyi (9 out of 14)

Tan Zhongyi dominated the event. She was the best fighter and even though she also had her ups and downs, she was most adept at smoothing them over.

She started the event by beating her compatriot Lei Tingjie with the black pieces and followed it up with a smooth win over Vaishali.

Tan Zhongyi – Vaishali Rameshbabu

Women's Candidates Toronto (2), 05.04.2024

1.d4 ♖f6 2.♖c3 d5 3.♕f4 The Jobava isn't considered very threatening anymore, but Tan Zhongyi has her sights on the middlegame.

3...c5 4.e3 cxd4 5.exd4 a6 6.♖f3 ♖c6 7.h3 This is innocuous. White usually tries to play the Jobava in a more aggressive manner with ♖e5 and an advance of the kingside pawns with g4 and h4.

7...♕f5 8.♕d3 The exchange of the light-squared bishops is usually good

for Black in the Carlsbad structure. In this case we have a reversed Carlsbad, but the main themes still remain.

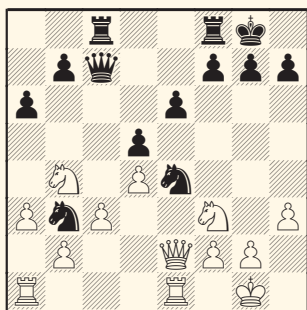
8...♙xd3 9.♖xd3 e6 10.0-0 ♔d6 11.♙xd6 ♖xd6 12.♖fe1 0-0 13.a3

The position is completely equal and seemingly dull. It's hard to imagine any side stirring up trouble, though generally speaking White should try to play in the centre (the e5-outpost) and kingside while Black should organise a minority attack on the queenside. With her last move White prepares the transfer of the awkward knight on c3 to the ideal square on d3.

13...♖c7 14.♘a2 The knight will come to d3 via c1 or b4.

14...♖ac8 15.c3 ♘e4 16.♖e2 ♘a5 17.♘b4 The knight almost arrived.

17...♘b3?!



A strange move. The knight looks good, but it's largely ineffective on b3. This decision shows us the depth of Tan Zhongyi's opening choice. By choosing a dull position she hoped to dull Vaishali's tactical talent. Lo and behold, Vaishali makes a bad positional decision. She also went for a position with a clear plan for her, a plan which is not affected by exchanges of pieces. This meant that she calmly proceeded to build up her kingside play while she hoped that Vaishali won't be able to

balance her own play on the queenside with the need to keep an eye on the kingside. As we shall see, Tan Zhongyi's game plan worked to perfection.

18.♖ad1 a5 19.♘d3 a4 20.♘fe5 Even objectively White is somewhat better already. More importantly, though, her plan is easy and the moves are natural, unlike Black's.

20...♘a5 Vaishali realises the mistake and reroutes the knight to c4, having wasted time beforehand.

21.f3 ♘d6 22.♘f4 ♖ac4 23.♘ed3

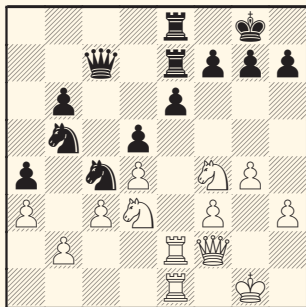
White avoided the exchange of knights as she can make better use of her own - the knight on d3 safely guards the queenside (the pawn on b2) while the knight on f4 can be used in the attack. The knight on f4 also keeps an eye on the e6-pawn, thus discouraging play in the centre with ...f6.

23...♖fe8 24.♖f2 ♖e7 25.♖e2 ♖ce8 26.♖de1 White prophylactically doubled the rooks on the e-file to stop ...f6 and ...e5.

26...b6 This move controls the c5-square, but does nothing to interfere with White's kingside play. The move also shows the lack of ideas Black suffers from in this position.

After 26...♖d8 27.g4 the engine proposes 27...♖h8 28.h4 g6 as a better defence. Still, it looks very shaky after 29.♖g3 (29.h5?! g5! closes the kingside.) 29...h6 30.♖h2 when White can prepare for a pawn push on the kingside at some point while Black can only wait.

27.g4 ♘b5?



Black wants to use the d6-square for the queen to defend the pawn on e6 and then play ...f6 and ...e5, but this is too slow.

27...♔d7 was a faster and better way to do it. Black is still fine after this move. A sample line is 28.♔g3 f6 29.h4 e5! 30.♘xd5 ♖e6 and Black will have the safer king once the game opens, giving her good compensation.

28.♔h4 ♔d6 29.♘h5 f6 30.g5 Now Black doesn't have time for ...e5 as White's play on the kingside is faster.

30...f5? A positional capitulation.

30...fxg5 was the only move to somehow stay in the game. 31.♔xg5 ♖f7 32.f4 looks grim for Black, but at least she's not immediately lost.

31.♖g2 Introducing ♘f6 ideas.

31...♔h8 32.♘df4 The attack just crashes through. White's ideas are ♘f6 or ♘g6.

32...e5 A desperate attempt.

33.♘f6! gxf6 34.♘g6+ White takes on e7 next, opens the g-file and wins with a direct attack.

1-0

An easy win on the surface, but the foundation was set by the very shrewd choice of opening variation and the subsequent pawn structure, specially tailored to her young opponent's inexperience.

This win put Tan Zhongyi in the early lead with 2/2.

Another very important game for Tan Zhongyi's tournament was the comeback win against the same opponent in the second half of the tournament. Before that game Tan Zhongyi lost to Lei Tingjie and lost the sole lead, so it was crucial for her to regain her confidence.

Vaishali Rameshbabu – Tan Zhongyi

Women's Candidates Toronto (9), 14.04.2024

1.e4 c5 2.c3 e6 3.d4 d5 4.exd5 Vaishali chooses a calmer move than the transposition to an Advance French with 4.e5.

4...exd5 5.♘f3 a6 The usual move is 5...♘c6. With the game move Black stops the check on b5 and prepares to play ...c4 after White's next move. This plan with ...c4 in these structures was successfully used by Abasov in his game against Nepomniachtchi.

6.♘d3 c4 7.♘c2 ♘d6 8.0-0 ♘e7 The development of the knight on e7 avoids problems with the pin ♘g5. Abasov experienced problems with that pin in his game with Nakamura.

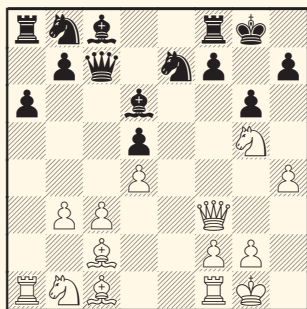
9.b3 cxb3 10.axb3 0-0 Based on the examples from this game and the aforementioned Nepomniachtchi-Abasov, the pawn structure in the centre proved out to be quite reliable for Black.

11.♘g5 g6 The alternative 11...h6 was also possible.

12.♔f3 In line with her style, Vaishali plays for an attack, but Black's position is too solid.

Play in the centre with 12.c4 was more in line with the requirements of the position. After 12...♗bc6 13.♗c3 ♕b4 14.♕b2 ♕f5∞ the position is balanced with chances for both sides.

12...♖c7 13.h4?!



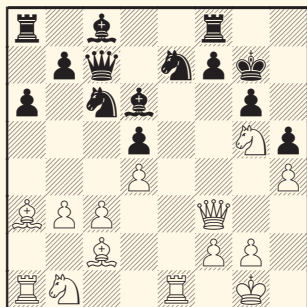
This weakens the g4-square.

13.♗a3 was much better, threatening ♗b5 and not weakening the position. 13...♕d7 14.♖h1 ♖d8 with ...♗bc6 next, with a complex middlegame ahead.

13...♗bc6 Black develops, though the immediate 13...h5 was quite good and likely better. Now Black threatens ...♗xd4, so White doesn't have time for h5.

14.♕a3 ♖g7 15.♖e1 15.h5 is met by 15...h6 16.♗h3 b5 threatening ...b4. 17.♕xd6 ♖xd6 18.♗f4 b4 gives White initiative on the queenside.

15...h5!

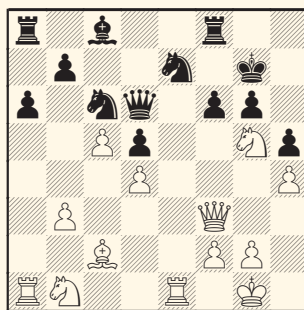


Finally fixing the weakness on g4.

16.c4? Vaishali rushes to provoke a crisis, but White's underdeveloped position is not ready for it.

16.♕xd6 ♖xd6 17.♗h3 with the idea of ♗f4. 17...♕g4 18.♖f4 ♖d7 is still more pleasant for Black, but White has an acceptable position.

16...f6! 17.♕xd6 ♖xd6 18.c5?



The decisive mistake.

18.♗h3 was the only move not to lose on the spot. After 18...♕xh3 19.♖xh3 ♗xd4 20.♖c3 ♗ec6 Black is a clear pawn up, but White can perhaps hope for some counterplay at the expense of the somewhat weakened black king.

18...♖c7 Now everything falls apart for White - the knight on g5 is hanging and so is the pawn on d4.

19.♗h3 ♗xd4 20.♖e3 20.♖c3 ♗xc2 21.♖xc2 ♕xh3 22.gxh3 ♗f5 is "only" positionally winning for Black - she is a pawn up and has the better position.

20...♗xc2 21.♖xe7+ ♖f7 White loses more material because of the fork.

0-1

Vaishali self-destructed in this game, but to win a tournament one must have some luck.

Tan Zhongyi had her share of saved lost positions, against Lagno (see above) and against Salimova in round 11, but it was always her fighting spirit that saw her through the difficulties.

Tan Zhongyi was the strongest player in Toronto. Her courageous decision to continue the game against Lei Tingjie when a draw would have been the practical decision backfired, but she was rewarded for her courage in the following games. This courage,

the fighting spirit, the clever opening preparation with both colours and the pure chess qualities of her high class were the factors that determined Tan Zhongyi's victory.

A former World Champion from 2017, now she will get a rematch with Ju Wenjun - she lost to her in 2018 with the score 5.5-4.5 and will certainly try to do better this time.

The results in Toronto showed that the Chinese domination in women's chess continues and for the time being, there is no indication that things will change.

STANDINGS OF THE 2024 CANDIDATES TOURNAMENT				
Rk	Player	Score	SB	Wins
1	Tan Zhongyi (CHN)	9/14	60.5	5
2	Koneru Humpy (IND)	7.5/14	52.25	3
3	Lei Tingjie (CHN)	7.5/14	52	4
4	R Vaishali (IND)	7.5/14	47.5	6
5	Aleksandra Goryachkina (FIDE)	7/14	47	2
6	Kateryna Lagno (FIDE)	6.5/14	45	1
7	Nurgul Salimova (BUL)	5.5/14	39.5	1
8	Anna Muzychuk (UKR)	5.5/14	38.75	0

Rk	Player	TZ	KH	LT	RV	AG	KL	NS	AM
1	Tan Zhongyi (CHN)		½ ½	0 1	1 1	½ ½	1 ½	½ ½	1 ½
2	Koneru Humpy (IND)	½ ½		0 1	1 ½	½ ½	½ ½	1 0	½ ½
3	Lei Tingjie (CHN)	0 1	0 1		1 0	½ 1	½ ½	½ ½	½ ½
4	R Vaishali (IND)	0 0	½ 0	1 0		1 ½	0 1	1 1	½ 1
5	Aleksandra Goryachkina (FIDE)	½ ½	½ ½	0 ½	½ 0		½ ½	½ 1	1 ½
6	Kateryna Lagno (FIDE)	½ 0	½ ½	½ ½	0 1	½ ½		½ ½	½ ½
7	Nurgul Salimova (BUL)	½ ½	1 0	½ ½	0 0	0 ½	½ ½		½ ½
8	Anna Muzychuk (UKR)	½ 0	½ ½	½ ½	0 ½	½ 0	½ ½	½ ½	

EMIL SUTOVSKY, FIDE CEO, IN HIS WORDS – ON THE CANDIDATES A TOURNAMENT OF FIRSTS

SERIOUSLY, THE CANDIDATES TOURNAMENT HAS ALWAYS STOOD APART. FOR MANY, THIS IS THE MOST INTERESTING EVENT OF THE CHESS BIENNIAL.

And even in this glorious series of iconic tournaments, the competition in Toronto turned out to be special.

For the first time, such a young chess player became the winner - Gukesh is not even 18 years old!

For the first time, four players simultaneously claimed victory in the last round.

For the first time... yes, there were many firsts.

The tournament was a great success - and we also tried to live up to it. We built a large fan zone, where grandmasters and streamers commented on the games, and where participants and fans came together.

We organized side events [exhibitions, excursions, the FIDE Torch ceremony...].

We built a system of slots in the auditorium to allow everyone in, but not to interfere with the players. By the way, all entrance tickets were purchased long before the end of the tournament - and this in non-chess Canada!

But all this is a prelude - as the main things happened on the board. And how many emotions there were!

Gukesh certainly deserved to win. After the tournament, I had a chance to talk to him and he made a very pleasant impression. Calm, respectful, knows the history of chess well and generally enjoys talking and asking questions on all topics related to his favourite game.



The game is truly a favourite one - and Gukesh devotes all his time to it. He left school a long time ago, but the guy is by no means limited, he speaks three languages - his native Tamil, Telugu and English. Understands but does not speak Hindi very well, and knows basic Spanish.

He doesn't play online, isn't active on social networks, doesn't use instant messengers.

In general, a modern version of Fischer, but with a much more stable psychology.

The women's tournament was also exciting, and although Tan's final victory looked very confident, there was tension in the tournament right up to the last round. In general, the decision to combine both candidates seems right.

Returning to the organization of the competition, I would like to note the great work done by Pavel Tregubov and his team.

And, of course, a necessary factor was the financial support of our sponsors and patrons: the Scheinberg family and One Hotel Toronto.

Thanks to everyone who followed.

See you soon!

This is the English translation of the article published by Emil Sutvosky on his Facebook page. We are publishing it here with his permission.

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